



The following article appeared in State Street Wire.

On energy plan, cost considered before safety, says League of Women Voters

By Timothy J. Carroll | July 26th, 2011 - 5:27pm

NEWARK – Many experts and industry insiders spoke today about the state’s Energy Master Plan, but it was a polite woman from the League of Women Voters who garnered the most applause of the day.

Ellie Gruber, a member of the League’s natural resources committee, said the state’s plan is overly concerned with cost efficiency.

“Our lives, health and welfare depend on the government watching out for us, not watching the bottom line,” she said at the public hearing here. “We are not customers. We are not looking for a bargain. We are depending on you to keep us safe and healthy... This is no time to be calling for cost effective solutions when long-term impacts (have not been examined).”

Gruber took issue with what she perceived as endorsements of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, and a continued reliance on coal power.

“There is a real danger that our water resources, both quality and quantity, will be damaged,” she said, by employing fracking to extract natural gas from underwater reserves. She asked for a moratorium on the practice – which is echoed in a bill passed by the Legislature awaiting Gov. Chris Christie’s signature – “until rigorous scientific studies are completed,” she asked.

Board of Public Utilities President Lee Solomon, moderating the event, intimated that the Energy Master Plan does not endorse fracking specifically, although it does point out the bargain prices of natural gas and the abundance regionally.

“The key to that is oversight and making sure it’s done the right way,” he said.

Gruber said the new Energy Master Plan draft “takes a giant step backwards” from the blueprint laid out in 2008. “When energy costs more, residents use less,” she said, calling it a cost-attentive plan that lacks focus on energy efficiency.

Dena Mottola Jaborska, executive director of Environment N.J., echoed Gruber’s sentiment that energy efficiency was not addressed to the extent that it should have been.

“No mandate,” she said, “nothing concrete to drive forward energy efficiency in the state.” She called efficiency initiatives the “cheapest, cleanest part of our energy plan,” but attacked the board for removing funding for the Clean Energy Program.

She said the scientific analysis was lacking and, where provided, “really flimsy.”

The state’s reduction of its goal for renewable energy – from 30 percent to 22.5 percent – was unfortunate, she said. “Thirty percent is not a pie in the sky (number),” she said. The reduction will curb increased attention in the private sector for renewables, “chilling a market that’s really on fire.”

Solomon made clear that the board does not set policy, but merely carries out the policy initiatives of elected officials, as was the case with the reduction in the renewable energy goal.

Nonetheless, Jaborska said, “(The draft) looks like it causes more problems than it solves,” including its points on fracking and global warming emissions.

Scott Schultz, president of Advanced Solar, said the state’s solar initiatives are working as they were designed to when they were devised to in 2007.

In 2003, he said, his company had performed a total of six solar installations in the state; in 2011, the company has completed over 10,000 installations, creating 40 megawatts of solar energy just last month.

“The solar program in the state has worked,” Schultz said, “weaning” the industry off of rebate programs utilizing market momentum. “It has become one of the largest drivers for employment in the state.” Next, he said, is the “migration” from small solar to large solar. “If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.”

Karen Alexander of the N.J. Utilities Association said the group is working on a “consensus position” on the plan from its numerous members in the seven energy utilities regulated by the BPU. She said the 2008 plan provided “no certainty” for an industry in need of “clear direction.” Goals must be “realistic and balanced,” she said, with job creation and cost to customers balanced with the needs of businesses.

Ted Michaels, president of the Energy Recovery Council, thanked the state for its commitment to waste energy facilities that turn garbage into electricity, “an abundant home-grown fuel source.”

He said one ton of trash can be converted into 100 kilowatt hours of electricity at a landfill by recovering the methane gas produced, but waste energy facilities can convert that garbage into 700 kilowatt hours of energy. If the state decides to increase support for the industry, it could create about 1,000 jobs in New Jersey over a few years, he said.