



MY TURN



Blame obstructionists for huge electric bills

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DOUGLAS GABLINSKE

true

It is no surprise that National Grid is proposing a 53-percent increase in electricity rates for this coming October (“National Grid seeks 53-percent rate hike,” news, July 27). What is surprising is that it has taken this long for electricity rates to increase.

The electricity rate structure in Rhode Island is convoluted, confusing and complicated. Most people don’t understand their bill when they get it, but they do know when their overall electricity bill goes up or down. Make no doubt about it: it will go a lot higher in the near future unless a few things happen.

Simply put, we are not generating enough electrical power from centralized power-generating plants. Competitive and regulatory pressures are driving many of these plants out of business. At least five have already closed and another five are likely to be closed in the next five years. These centralized electrical-generating plants are businesses that must operate at a profit or their owners will shut them down, as they have been doing and will keep on doing.

So what’s the answer? Some people hypothesize that solar, wind and other renewables, otherwise known as decentralized distributed

electrical generation, is the answer. With technological breakthroughs, particularly in battery storage capacity, they could eventually be right.

However, in no way on God's earth is renewable energy the answer to the price problem. Rhode Island has the dubious distinction of having the fourth-highest residential electric rates in the contiguous 48 states. The industrial and commercial rates in Rhode Island are even higher, number one and number two in the country. These high rates put a heavy burden on residents and especially on businesses trying to compete on a regional, national and international basis.

In terms of producing cheap energy, decentralized renewable electrical-generating systems are entirely uncompetitive with centralized electrical-generating plants. Proponents will point out that the construction costs of renewable systems have come down, and they have. However, they are still heavily subsidized by tax credits, grants, etc. Without incentives, they cannot compete in a free, deregulated and open electrical-generation market.

We concur with the thinking that decades of burning fossil fuels have taken their toll on Mother Earth and the air above. However, what has taken decades to create cannot be unwound in a flash, as much as some want it to happen that way.

The transformation will be a decades-long process. It has started with the decommissioning of oil and coal centralized electrical-generating plants, because they can no longer compete with natural gas in price and because natural gas produces about half of the carbon emissions that oil and coal do as a byproduct of electrical generation.

Natural gas has become the fossil fuel of choice for creating electricity from centralized electrical-generating plants. This is good for pricing, good for reliability and good for the environment.

So if that is all good, what's the problem then?

The problem is obstructionism.

Obstructionists — or purists, as I refer to them — do not want any fossil fuels or any centralized electrical-generating plants. They are obstructing centralized gas-generating plants from being constructed, like the Clear River Energy Center, in Burrillville, proposed by Invenergy, and obstructing such gas-expansion pipelines as the Spectra proposal.

More natural gas pipelines to the Northeast and more centralized gas electrical-generating plants are undoubtedly the answer to carry us to the day when technology can deliver the battery storage necessary for decentralized electrical distribution.

Until then, be prepared to pay more, and more, and more, for electricity in Rhode Island. And don't blame National Grid for the power-supply part of the electricity cost equation. Blame the obstructionists, as that is squarely where the blame belongs.

— Douglas Gablinske is executive director of the Energy Council of Rhode Island (TEC-RI), a member organization made up of large energy users, including manufacturers, businesses and institutions.