# Missouri consumers will once again have a statewide advocacy group

St. Louis Post-Dispatch - January 16, 2006
By Michael D. Sorkin

Nearly 40 years ago, a handful of St. Louis-area moms, upset with the high cost of feeding their families, decided to survey supermarket prices and share the results with friends.

They called themselves Housewives Elect Lower Prices, and they became so successful they went on to tackle the electric, gas and telephone industries. Their Utility Consumers Council of Missouri became a force to be reckoned with, and the governor even named one of its members to the state agency that regulates utilities.

Over the years, the council withered as members moved, took other jobs, got older or died. Today, no statewide group represents Missouri consumers on pocketbook issues.

At 2 p.m. today some of the original founders will get together with latter-day activists in the Bingham Gallery next to the Missouri Senate in Jefferson City to announce a new statewide advocacy group: the Consumers Council of Missouri.

Their goal: Sign up thousands of consumers across Missouri and represent them before the legislature and state agencies that set insurance, utility and financial fees.

That's ambitious talk for a group so new it has no money, office or staff. But founders of the council think the time is right. The way they see it, the legislature bent over backward last year to help big business, sending numerous bills to the governor that will force consumers to dig deeper into their pockets.

"People used to think that government was there to help them, that it would protect the little guy," says Judi Roman, a public relations consultant and one of the organizers. "Today, they realize that government and big business are working together - and families are bearing the brunt of that."

The administration of Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt has insisted it is trying to produce a climate that's good for business - which it says is also good for consumers.

The gold standard for consumer groups nationally is the Citizens Utility Board of Illinois. Since 1984, CUB as it is known, has helped win hundreds of millions of dollars in utility rate decreases and refunds. It also takes credit for helping stop the companies from routinely making deals with politicians.

Founders of the new Missouri group are a long way from winning that kind of political clout.

CUB got off to a strong start 22 years ago because state law initially required utility companies to include CUB literature in envelopes along with monthly bills. The companies soon went to court to stop those free rides, and today CUB sends its solicitations in state mailings, such as vehicle registration renewal forms and tax returns.

With a budget of more than $2 million, CUB has more than 20 employees, enough to represent individual consumers in complaints with electric, gas, water or telephone companies.

The Missouri council will have to depend upon membership fees ($10 for now) for its new budget. Initially, the council won't have the resources to help individuals in fights with a utility.

"This isn't going to be a slam dunk," says former Sen. Wayne Goode, a leading consumer advocate before retiring last year after 42 years in the Legislature. "But you have to start somewhere."

He sees the consumer council as helping to mobilize consumers and letting legislators know there is another side to what they are hearing from lobbyists.

Goode isn't missed by the lobbyists he did battle with in the Legislature, and some other founders of the new consumer council also have been known to give heartburn to industry reps.

John Coffman is the council's interim president. Until last year, he was the state's public counsel, representing utility consumers in rate cases. That is, until he warned that legislation being pushed by business lobbyists would cost consumers hundreds of millions of dollars in higher monthly bills.

The Blunt administration fired Coffman after a Republican legislator complained about the "bureaucrat." Coffman now lives in Webster Groves and works part-time representing AARP in utility cases.

Martha Hogerty of Kansas City, public counsel for 13 years before Coffman succeeded her, is another interim board member of the consumer council. After Coffman's firing, she accused the Legislature and the administration of having "contempt for the consumer."

Jay Angoff is a former Missouri insurance commissioner and now a trial lawyer in Jefferson City. He continues to draw the wrath of industry reps for studies he performs for consumer groups that show how much profit insurers are making.

"The consumer has less power in Missouri than in many states," Angoff says.

Joyce Armstrong, another interim board member of the new council, retired in 1997 as executive director of the local unit of the American Civil Liberties Union. She was a founding member of the first two consumer groups in the 1960s and 1970s, along with Alberta Slavin.

Slavin, now in her 70s, has agreed to serve on the new board. Her work on the original council led the governor in 1977 to name her to the state Public Service Commission.

Other organizers include Sen. Pat Dougherty, D-St. Louis, who last week introduced legislation to prevent utilities from raising rates to make up for the money they lose when consumers conserve; and Sen. Joan Bray, D-University City, a frequent target of pro-business legislators.

Organizing sessions for the new consumer council began in Bray's living room in June, at the end of a legislative session in which legislators gave utilities the right to more quickly adjust customer rates, removed most state regulation over local telephone rates, and voted to make it easier for homebuilders to avoid lawsuits for defective work.

Bray and some other Democrats unsuccessfully fought the bills. "The monied interests definitely have the upper hand," she says.

The consumers council claims members in Kansas City, Columbia, Jefferson City and northern Missouri. An organizing meeting is planned for March.

Martin Cohen, who led CUB in Illinois for 12 years and now is the governor's first consumer adviser, says banding together is the only way consumers will have any power:

"An individual can't make any difference in a rate case," he said in an interview last year. "But 100,000 individuals can."

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