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## Gov. Quinn makes pro-consumer choice in naming Flores new ICC chief

By Steve Daniels  
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(Crain's) — By naming Alderman Manuel Flores new chairman of the Illinois Commerce Commission, Gov. Pat Quinn has met expectations that he would remake the state's utility regulatory agency into a pro-consumer body. It just took him longer to do it than many observers expected.

Outgoing ICC Chairman Charles Box's term ended roughly a year ago. Mr. Quinn was expected to replace Mr. Box, who has sided with utilities on a number of issues during his term, within months of his ascension to the governor's post last February.

The appointment of the 1st Ward alderman, along with the naming of community organizer John Colgan last year to an open ICC post, puts the governor's pro-consumer stamp on a body that he has long complained is too easy on the utilities it oversees.

And, more crucially, Mr. Flores' appointment comes just before the commission must rule on Peoples Gas' request for a \$122-million rate hike — in the dead of winter when heating bills are high, and just weeks before the gubernatorial primary in which Mr. Quinn hopes to win the Democratic nomination.

The commission must vote by Jan. 25 on the Chicago natural gas utility's request. An administrative law judge for the commission recommended late last year that the ICC grant just \$64 million of the \$122 million Peoples asked for. ICC staff recommended only \$53 million.

But, in a key potential victory for Peoples, the judge also advocated for the utility's request to increase Chicagoans' gas bills automatically — without ICC review ahead of time — in order to be reimbursed for more rapidly replacing aging cast-iron pipes beneath city streets. That request is adamantly opposed by consumer groups; Peoples has warned that denial would slow needed upgrades.

"We think (Mr. Flores) is a great pick," said David Kolata, executive director of consumer advocacy group Consumer Utility Board, which Mr. Quinn helped found in the 1980s.

As an alderman, Mr. Flores took a keen interest in promoting green jobs, something that appeals to Howard Learner, executive director of the Chicago-based Environmental Law and Policy Center.

"We haven't had a chair for awhile that's really been a Chicagoan," Mr. Learner said. "Manny Flores is an alderman from the city of Chicago who thinks about stuff like, 'What's the impact of something on my neighborhood?' The ICC makes fundamental decisions that affect people's pocketbooks and daily lives."

A spokeswoman for Peoples said the company had no immediate comment on Mr. Flores' appointment.

In a statement, Commonwealth Edison Co. said, "We look forward to working with (Mr. Flores) to develop comprehensive approaches to enhance reliability . . . and empowering customers with the tools they need to make more informed energy decisions." As for rate hikes and the like, ComEd said it looks forward to working with the ICC to find "comprehensive solutions to critical issues that balance the interests of consumers and utilities."

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