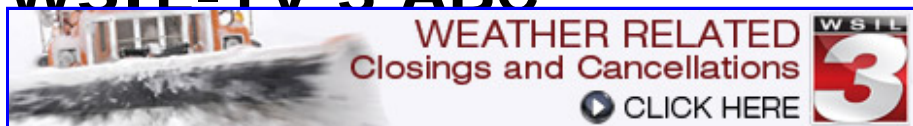


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📅 Last updated 9:19 am CT January 05, 2010.

Consumer Advocates Have High Hopes for New ICC Chair



CHICAGO-- Consumer advocates and state lawmakers weary from battles with utility companies have high expectations for Governor Pat Quinn's choice to chair the Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC).

The ICC oversees Illinois utilities. One of its tasks is determining whether companies get to raise rates.

"My hope is that the head of the ICC will assume a watch-dog role, not a lap-dog role for the utility industry," said Rep. John Bradley, (D)-Marion.

The body has a reputation for siding with power companies. Consumer advocates hope the appointment of Chicago Alderman Manny Flores, a Democrat, will transform the ICC into a more consumer-friendly body.

"He is a consumer advocate like I am," Quinn said in a press conference Monday.

With Ameren rate increases on the table, Bradley finds the Flores appointment especially promising.

"The ICC has been a problem for consumers in the state of Illinois for decades and hopefully this is a step in the right direction," he said.

Bradley led an effort by state lawmakers in 2007 to create a relief package for customers after a drastic rate hike approved by the ICC. With a new face at the commission, he hopes he and his colleagues won't be forced to do that again.

"But in the event that we do, I would hope that this ICC or the new ICC would not look Southern Illinoisans in the eye and tell them that a Missouri company or a Chicago company is more important than they are," he said.

Flores is not the only new face Quinn's sent to the ICC. He appointed John Colgan, a community organizer also known for consumer advocacy, in November.

With the role of governor came expectations that Quinn would turn the ICC into a more consumer-friendly body. The sitting chairman's term was up in January 2009, about the same time Quinn took the oath of office.

Flores is considered a rising star in Chicago politics. A former prosecutor, he was elected to the Chicago City Council in 2003 and gets high marks from the Citizens Utility Board (which Quinn co-founded) for being a "strong voice for consumers."

Southern Illinois lawmakers admit they know little about Flores. Rep. Mike Bost, (R)-Murphysboro, who also advocated for the 2007 relief package, reserved judgement but pointed out that Quinn has chosen someone with little or no business experience to lead a commission charged with striking balance between commerce and consumers.

To the question of balance Flores responded, "We have to approach this with a way toward looking for solutions that benefit everybody."

Ameren spokeswoman Victoria Bush said the company looks forward to "encouraging a relationship" with Flores.

The company expects to, "Keep dialogue open so that we continue to balance the needs of the customer and the needs of the utility and stay on track with our mission to provide safe and reliable energy to our customers."

Ameren is asking regulators to approve gas and electric rate increases that would cost the average customer an additional \$60 per year. If approved it would take effect in the Spring.

Quinn has also charged Flores with focusing on green initiatives in his new role.

The appointment requires the approval of the Illinois Senate.

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