

Residents push-back against proposed energy rate hike

BY TODD LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

Opposition is strong to Duke Energy Carolinas' request for a nearly 10 percent rate increase.

The energy giant's request must be approved by the North Carolina Utilities Commission, whose commissioners are appointed by the governor. The commission is holding public witness hearings across the state to gather input from Duke Energy customers.

Commissioners were in Winston-Salem yesterday, after the Chronicle's press time.

NCWARN, an environmental nonprofit group that is a key opponent of a rate hike, held sessions in Winston-Salem to help prepare local residents to speak before the Commission.

"Our objection is that the commission continues to allow for Duke Energy to recoup the expenses upon these energy choices that are more expensive and harmful for the general public," NCWARN's Sammy Slade said.

Duke Energy wants the rate increase to recoup the money it spent to modernize two of its nuclear power stations and construct two new coal plants. NCWARN maintains that it would be cheaper for customers and Duke Energy and better for the environment to invest in methods like weatherization and renewable energy.

NCWARN's opposition and concerns are shared by a number of local groups, including 350.org Winston-Salem, Occupy Winston-Salem and Democracy NC.

"To us, that's an issue that affects people's lives and so we're happy to do what we can," said Democracy NC's local field organizer Linda Sutton.

Pete MacDowell program director for NCWARN, said getting state residents to speak out is important.

"They will be charged again and again and again for unnecessary expenditures and unnecessary plants until people put a stop to it," he said.

MacDowell said he was dismayed that the NC Utility Commission's Public Staff, which advocates on behalf of the public, came up with a settlement recommendation of an approximately 5.1 percent average hike among Duke Energy cus-



Sammy Slade

tomers, below the 9.7 percent the company asked for, before the public hearings were even over.

David Drooz, a Public Staff attorney, said the recommendation was not made without input from residents. The Public Staff has an entire division that takes consumer complaints, he said, and the settlement recommendation reflects hundreds of hours put in by dozens of accountants, engineers and others on the staff to audit the company and determine if the rate increase it requested is warranted.

"Some people understandably have the perception that the company doesn't need more money, that they ought to be denied, that the rates ought to be lowered, but we

have to look at what their costs really are," said Drooz. "If the company was to have their rates reduced to a level that they're not covering their costs, then ultimately that's going to impair their ability to provide reliable electric service to their customers."

Duke Energy had sought and won approval by the NC Utilities Commission last year for a 7.2 percent overall hike, but the decision was challenged by Attorney General Roy Cooper on the basis the commission failed to balance the needs of consumers with that of Duke Energy. The N.C. Supreme Court agreed and overturned the increase in April, sending it back to the commission for further consideration. Duke Energy's last approved hike increase — seven percent — was more than two years ago.

Duke Energy spokesperson Lisa Parrish said the improvements the company made made the energy it provides more efficient and cleaner.

"This is a third in a series of three rate cases that involved modernizing our facilities, which puts us ahead of the curve in terms of environmental compliance," said Parrish.

All work that is cov-

ered by the increase has already been done, she said, so the rate increase will help Duke recover the cost, she said, adding that this was the final phase of company's modernization program.

If the hike is approved, Duke Energy would coup an extra \$205 million in the first two years and \$235 million a year after that, according to the Associated Press.

Commissioners are expected to consider the rate hike after evidentiary hearings are held in July.

Duke Energy customers can submit statements to the Utilities Commission by emailing statements@ncuc.net.



Mr. and Mrs. Bennett

Bennetts celebrate 50th wedding anniversary

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

On June 15, Franklin and Bettie Bennett celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a luncheon hosted by the couple's children at Galilee Missionary Baptist Church, where Dr. Nathan E. Scovens is pastor.

The Bennett's children are Felecia Bennett-Giles (Terrance) of Clemmons; Dr. Belinda Bennett McFeeters (Forrest) of Walkertown; and Dr. Jabbar R. Bennett of Providence, RI. The Bennetts have three grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Mr. Bennett, a 1960 graduate of Carver High school, served in the U.S. Armed Forces from 1966-1968 and was stationed in Korea during the Vietnam Era. He earned a BS in 1975 from Winston-Salem State University and an MA from NC A&T State University in 1978. He worked for Continental Can from 1969-1975 and retired from the N.C. Department of Corrections as a probation/parole officer in 1995.

Mrs. Bennett, formerly Bettie Lou Williams, is a 1959 graduate of Atkins High School. She attended N.C. A&T with the class of 1963, and is a 1964 graduate of Russell Commercial School, where she earned the distinction of salutatorian. In 1964, Mrs. Bennett was hired as the first African American employee at First Union National Bank, where she worked in bookkeeping. She began working for the U.S. Veterans Administration in 1966, retiring as a senior claims examiner in 1998. While working with the VA, Mrs. Bennett also served as the Equal Opportunity Counselor.

The Bennetts are members of Galilee Missionary Baptist Church, where they serve as deacon and deaconess.

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