

My Turn: Public Service Department puts the public interest first

BY DAVID J. O'BRIEN • WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2010

I am very thankful for your lead editorial of Oct. 21 because it opens up a very much needed public discussion about the public interest ("Regulator's partisanship chips away at credibility"). As commissioner, my one job is to be a consumer advocate. No matter what I am going to stand up for the consumer -- Vermont ratepayers.

In the last seven years I probably have angered some who have agendas that are inconsistent with the ratepayer interest. Indeed, some of the most damaging [policies](#) for consumers often come from the political realm where facts are often overlooked and the issues exaggerated.

I would invite the Free Press to review my entire record as commissioner to evaluate if there truly are indications of partisanship. Together with a dedicated team of professionals I have taken the heat repeatedly from all sides to protect consumers and the public interest. Whether it has meant imposing legitimate [rate](#) reduction on utilities or exposing millions in unjustified rate collections by a telecommunication provider, which led to thousands of Vermonters getting DSL broadband for the first time, the best interests of Vermonters has always been my guide.

The Public [Service](#) Department has taken Entergy management to task on many occasions over issues at Vermont Yankee including the widely reported cooling tower failure and it was the Public Service Department that brought the misleading disclosure of underground pipes to light (Vermont Public Service Department Commissioner David O'Brien told the Burlington Free Press that, "The governor feels this has been a breach of trust." 01.15.10 VBM).

I was the only government official, state or local that was willing to shine a light on the [financial](#) mishandling at Burlington Telecom. And regardless of this administration's stance on industrial wind, the Public Service Department has applied the law accurately and supported the East Haven, Georgia Mountain, Sheffield, and Deerfield wind projects.

Vermont is in an envious position with our electric supply portfolio. We have perhaps the greenest electric supply in the nation in terms of carbon content, we spend the most per capita in the nation on energy efficiency and have the lowest electric [rates](#) in the Northeast. We are in that position largely because of our reliable, clean base load sources from Hydro Quebec and Vermont Yankee. That is an irrefutable fact. I have been exceedingly consistent in my public statements identifying errors made by Entergy while refusing to inflate matters beyond what the facts support. Yet legislative leaders, especially Senator Shumlin would like to mislead Vermonters to score political points.

The public deserves an energy debate based in fact, not hyperbole. There are very well financed interests that, for personal financial gain, oppose Vermont Yankee. The actions of Mr. Blittersdorf are perhaps the most visible example of this taking place. He is part of a group of

folks who have contributed heavily to political campaigns in order to have legislation passed that directly benefit them. These projects cost captive ratepayers as much as six times the current market price.

Vermonters have the right to ask who is looking out for them. Is it the Public Service Department who supports 6 cent renewable power from Hydro Quebec and 11 cent wind from New Hampshire or special interests who force ratepayers by law to pay 30 cents and then demand tax credits for themselves?

We have a clear choice on energy policy between a policy based on science and economics and one that is based on hyperbole and greed. My department will always side with the facts and the best interests of Vermonters -- whether politically popular or not.

David J. O'Brien is the commissioner of the Vermont Public Service Department.