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Senate of Pennsylvania

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I oppose the base rate increase proposed by First Energy for electric base distribution services and residential customer charges to approximately 2.1 million residential, commercial, and industrial customers across Pennsylvania.

For reference, my Senate District includes the Penn Power Rate District Townships of McCandless, Pine, and Ross and the West Penn Power Rate District Boroughs of Brackenridge, Cheswick, Springdale, and Tarentum and Townships of East Deer, Fawn, Frazer, Harmar, Harrison, Indiana, Springdale, and West Deer.

First Energy proposes to raise annual revenues on Penn Power distributions by 42.3% and on West Penn Power distributions by 39.5%. Customers of Penn Power would see their monthly bill go up by nearly 12%; West Penn Power customers would see their monthly bills increase by over 10%. Additionally, West Penn Power customers in particular will suffer under this rate case as their monthly residential customer charge will MORE THAN DOUBLE—a 54.57% increase. Penn Power customers will see a 31.82% increase on that same customer charge, which is still unacceptable.

At a United Way Legislative Briefing earlier this year, I learned that the number one issue that the United Way 2-1-1 hotline gets calls about is housing insecurity, followed closely by utility payments. This struggle to meet basic needs echoes what I see in my office. My staff spends a significant amount of time helping constituents with applications for the Property Tax and Rent Rebate program, which gives property tax relief to our seniors over 65 and people who have disabilities. We hear constantly that this annual rebate allows people to make ends meet and keeps seniors in their homes.

Residents in Allegheny County face an additional struggle when it comes to utility payments. Having one of the oldest housing stocks in the nation means that many homes in our region need significant repairs for them to remain habitable, let alone become energy efficient. These repairs are expensive and often times out of reach for families and seniors. As a result, homes use more energy, driving up utility bills. The cycle of unaffordable repairs driving higher utility bills is unending for these residents.

The incredible heat that we've seen the past few summers has further put a strain on resources, as families and seniors try to keep their homes cool and safe during week-long 90+ degree heat waves. Cooling a home during this heat is expensive. And even a few years ago, our area got just a handful of 90 degree days per summer. Now, dangerous heat begins in June and extends through September, placing children, seniors, and the most vulnerable among us at increased risk.

Unfortunately, this year's budget did not include funding the Whole Home Repairs Program, which would have allowed homeowners to make habitability improvements that drive their utility bills down. This means that more individuals will be reliant on current universal service programs to keep the lights and the heat on throughout the winter months. While First Electric does make efforts in this Rate Case Proposal to create new outreach team to ensure that individuals who need assistance with their utility payments are receiving assistance, this is insufficient in the face of the stunning increase in individuals who will be unable to afford their payments. Customers who are least able to afford the rate increases will face the highest burdens, with little additional assistance proposed.

A significant portion of this rate increase proposal is aimed at EV infrastructure. I am extremely grateful to First Energy for being willing to address the need for EV drivers to charge responsibly and in a way that reduces strain on our electrical grid, but without a meaningful way of addressing equity and affordability, this plan will shift the burden of the rate increase on those least able to afford their basic utilities.

The Office of Consumer Advocate, the state office created by the legislature to advocate on behalf of Pennsylvanians in cases such as this, has raised significant concerns about these rate increases, calling the proposed 11.3% rate of return on equity "excessive." The OCA continued, saying, "Many of FE PA's proposals are an affront to the regulatory compact that has long existed in Pennsylvania to protect the public from monopolistic excess."

Our families, neighbors, and friends are struggling to make ends meet. As we see corporate profits soar, every day people face mounting costs at the grocery store and the gas pump. Their utilities are no different.

I cannot support this rate increase and I encourage the PUC not to approve the proposal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lindsey M. Williams".

Lindsey M. Williams
38th Senatorial District