

View from the Capitol

[This piece originally appeared in the North Haven Citizen.]

By State Rep. Steve Fontana

Welcome to this column, the first in a periodic series that I will be writing for the North Haven Citizen! Let me begin by thanking this newspaper for the chance to share with you news and views on activities at the State Capitol.

This past January, House Speaker Jim Amann appointed me House co-chairman of the General Assembly's Energy & Technology Committee. I appreciate this honor and responsibility, and the opportunity that it gives me to help shape public policy on this committee (a new assignment for me) over the next two years.

According to the General Assembly's joint rules, the Energy & Technology Committee has jurisdiction over "all matters relating to the Department of Public Utility Control, energy, telecommunications and information systems." Pursuant to this authority, this year the committee is working on legislation to address what may be our biggest challenge -- improving the reliability and efficiency of our electricity infrastructure.

Believe it or not, our state faces significant difficulty in procuring and delivering enough electricity to meet our needs. This difficulty, caused primarily by insufficient short-term capacity in southwestern Connecticut, annually costs us hundreds of millions of dollars in federally-mandated congestion costs. We receive little benefit for paying these costs, which stand to rise in future years. In addition, these costs, if left unaddressed, also will threaten our long-term economic prosperity.

Our goal, as a committee, is to lay the groundwork for diversified, decentralized, and cleaner electricity solutions to this need for capacity. We therefore are focusing on what we can do 1) to encourage so-called "distributed" generation, which will help to relieve the congestion in our electricity system, and 2) to support new investment in conservation and efficiency measures. We believe that these solutions, over time, will enhance the overall reliability of our electricity system, stabilize costs, increase efficiency, and, ultimately, bring more and better choices to consumers. I look forward to providing you further details on this legislation in a future column.

Even as we are working on this legislation, our committee also is reviewing other important issues for potential action. For instance, we currently are looking at a proposal, brought to us by SBC, to relax the regulatory standards that govern local telephone service in Connecticut. The company requested that we consider this legislation because, in its view, it suffers from increased competition from cable, wireless, and Internet companies that do not have to meet the same standards.

We intend to evaluate the proposal carefully and move forward with a bill to address SBC's concerns, but in the context of meeting our obligations to Connecticut consumers.

We believe that we must maintain vital consumer protections, even as we seek to level the playing field for all telephone service providers.

The committee expects to pass various proposals to address these and other issues by our March 22 deadline for action. I hope to update you on our progress, as well as specific initiatives related to specific North Haven interests, as the session continues.