

WITH ENERGY NEAR TOP OF AGENDA, EXPERTS TALK ABOUT POSSIBILITIES

By Gintautas Dumcius
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

BOSTON, FEB. 13, 2007.....Gov. Deval Patrick's administration should strive to lead the region in renewable energy, focus on the cost to businesses and its effect on the state's competitiveness, and stay wary of complacency over energy diversity. Oh, and cut back on that state police helicopter.

"I was going to suggest use less aviation," joked Sen. Michael Morrissey (D-Quincy), co-chairman of the Legislature's Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities and Energy, referring to this morning's Boston Herald piece on the governor using State Police helicopters for official trips across the state.

The advice on the energy front, expected to be a major area of policy changes this year, came from some of the state's top energy officials, who also talked today about the state joining the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), the governor's governmental reorganization plan, and liquefied natural gas needs.

House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi is expected to file sweeping energy legislation soon and has indicated his bill will be an early-session priority. With energy at the top of the agenda, a panel of experts convened at the Omni Parker House hotel today at an event sponsored by Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide and The Suffolk Group.

"I think you'll see us come up with a reasonable bill," said Morrissey's House counterpart on the committee, Rep. Brian Dempsey (D-Haverhill), who was also on the panel. "I think we're all moving in the same direction," with a balance between the interests of environmental advocates and business groups.

Other panelists included Ann Berwick, Patrick's energy undersecretary, Seth Kaplan, a senior attorney at the Conservation Law Foundation, and Robert Rio, vice president of governmental affairs at the Associated Industries of Massachusetts. The forum was moderated by Boston Globe business reporter Peter Howe.

Approximately 126 other bills relating to energy have been filed so far for the 2007-2008 session, according to a tracking report provided by The Suffolk Group.

Massachusetts has recently been "missing in action" in leading the region on tapping energy efficiency and renewable energy such as wind power and creating new jobs through them, with states like Vermont making a stronger presence, Kaplan said.

Others voiced concern over a regional approach, and instead pushed for a national policy on energy.

"The only thing we should be concerned about is cost," and its effect on the state's competitiveness, Rio said.

States participating in RGGI, such as includes Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, and Vermont, have some of the highest electricity rates in the nation, Rio said.

Patrick signed Massachusetts into RGGI, a pact to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from power plants, last month; Gov. Mitt Romney had opposed joining the group, saying it would leader to higher costs for consumers.

Rio warned the state may get too complacent about whether it is diverse enough in its energy resources.

"We're already dangerously reliant on natural gas," he said.

Federal regulators signed off on two LNG facilities off the coast of Gloucester in the last two weeks.

Morrissey and Berwick both acknowledged RGGI was borne out of frustration at a lack of a policy at the federal level. "We have to make it work," Morrissey said.

With a Democratically-controlled Congress, "That can also bring pressure to bear on the Republican administration," he added.

Morrissey also said he would take a "hard look" at Patrick's proposal to reorganize state government that includes breaking up the state Department of Telecommunications and Energy between the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development.

Berwick said the administration is "deeply committed" to working with the Legislature, and listed supplying energy at affordable prices and promoting clean energy as among their top priorities.

Patrick's proposal would also replace DTE's five-member commission and create a 3-member utilities commission, whose members are appointed by the governor, one of which will have to be a member of another political party, Berwick said.

"We're going back to a structure that's worked well in the past," Berwick said, adding that the administration will respect the commission's judicial powers.

The proposal also changes the nine-member energy facilities siting review board, making the energy and environment secretary chair, instead of the DTE chair, and adds the Department of Environmental Protection commissioner to the roster of board members.

Dempsey echoed Speaker DiMasi's recently voiced sentiments, saying the governor should have the chance to revamp the inner workings of his administration.

Patrick's proposal currently sits in Committee on State Administration and Regulatory Oversight, awaiting a hearing.

The issue of "net metering" might see action of its own soon. "Net metering" is the term for allowing customers' electric meters with renewable energy generating facilities to run backwards when their generators are producing more energy than they are consuming.

Morrissey said an ad hoc group, made up of lawmakers and energy advocates, will meet at the end of the month, having already held four to five meetings in the last five to six months to discuss legislation he has filed.

"We could also get overtaken by the administration," he said after the forum. "They may be more aggressive than we are. That remains to be seen."

Asked about "net metering," Robert Keough, a spokesman for the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, said, "At this point, I have to say only that we're exploring it along with a number of potential regulatory changes to manage peak demand and encourage alternative energy sources."

Samuel Krasnow, an attorney with the environmental advocacy non-profit Environment Northeast, who was among the 130 audience members to attend the 90-minute forum, said he saw a consensus among the panelists emerge on needing to tap into the energy efficiency and renewable energy.

"This is the moment, this is the window," he said.

- END -

Need background about policy issues and the history of current news stories? <http://www.issuesource.org>

<http://www.statehousenews.com>