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Jergeson 'report' on Electric City Power wrong, out of line

By BOB PANCICH

Last Saturday, the Tribune published an article by reporter Richard Ecke which featured PSC Chairman Greg Jergeson's criticisms of the Burns and McDonnell consulting report on the city of Great Falls' energy ventures.

Notable among the criticisms was that the consultants "failed to include a deferred supply credit given to customers for the year." This was important because it skewed the comparison of NorthWestern Energy's rates with Electric City Power's rates.

According to Public Service Commission Chairman Jergeson, "ECP customers barely eked out \$112,000 in savings compared to taking power supplies from NWE for the five-year period."

There is only one problem with this analysis. It is wrong. Dead wrong.

I asked the city for the calculation used in the consulting report. It shows that the deferred supply credit was subtracted from NWE rates for the years being compared. The comparison in the consulting report is correct. ECP customers saved approximately \$2.6 million for the period shown.

Remember that 25.88 percent of ECP's customer load consists of agencies supported by the taxpayers such as the schools and city operations. So part of the savings directly benefits the taxpaying public.

Chairman Jergeson calls the report's conclusions "sophomoric." This characterization is an insult to sophomores everywhere.

I would suggest that any competent high school sophomore could do better research and analysis than the PSC chairman. All he had to do is ask for the calculation rather than making it up.

The chairman states that he did his work on nights and weekends. It shows.

If the staff of the PSC had analyzed the consultant's report, this mistake would never have been made.

The Tribune bears some responsibility as well. Sadly, print journalism seems to have devolved to a process of running back and forth between people who are opposed to each other and reporting what they say. There appears to be no independent analysis or verification.

In this case, there wasn't even an attempt to check the facts or to get an opposing viewpoint. The call to the consultants was merely "cover" since they could not possibly have had time read the Jergeson report to make intelligent comment.

The chairman delivered his work and it was rushed into print as "news." If I were a cynical person I would say it was meant to influence the discussion between the City Commission and the ECP Board on Monday evening.

The Public Service Commission is a statewide regulatory body, not a policy-making body. Why is the titular head of a state regulatory agency spending time and effort bullying a local policy-making body, the City Commission, into acting on his conception of what local energy policy should be?

State law and common sense require public officials, in their official capacities, to act within the scope of their responsibilities. The Public Service Commission chairman might benefit by reflecting on this basic ethical requirement.

The Tribune might do some reflecting on its responsibilities as well. It might save future embarrassment