

Citizens Utility Board: Governor Walker signs budget supporting utility customer advocacy

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Sept. 21, 2017 — With the state biennial budget signed into law, the Citizens Utility Board would like to express its appreciation for state government leaders who worked to restore funding for groups that intervene in utility cases at the state Public Service Commission.

The budget restores in part a funding cut enacted by the Legislature in the 2015-17 budget. That cut led to cutbacks at the Citizens Utility Board, a residential customer advocacy group that has worked on behalf of millions of Wisconsin utility customers since 1979.

The Legislature last week endorsed Gov. Scott Walker's proposal to boost funding for intervenors to \$742,500 a year, after the Legislature cut the funding from more than \$1 million a year to \$371,000 per year in 2015. Gov. Walker signed the budget bill into law earlier today.

"We'd like to thank Gov. Walker and state lawmakers for their work to restore the 2015 funding cut," said Thomas Content, executive director of the Citizens Utility Board. "The new state budget signals that the voice of residential and small business customers needs to be heard, especially at a time when electricity rates rank above most Midwest states and are 13th highest in the nation."

CUB plays an active role in proceedings at the Public Service Commission, hiring experts to analyze utility proposals and provide perspective to help the state decide

whether utility proposals are in the best interest of customers.

For CUB, the Legislature's vote represents a positive step in the direction that Content, who was hired earlier this year, wants to take the organization, which has 2,500 members across the state.

"It's a time of great change in the energy sector, and Wisconsin deserves a stronger voice for consumers and small businesses to help keep rising utility rates in check," said Content. "We look forward to working with the PSC and other stakeholders to make sure the concerns of customers are heard."

More than 40 states rely on an agency within state government to handle the advocacy work that's a critical part of the process of setting utility rates and profit levels. And some states, including Michigan, Illinois and Minnesota, have two state agencies plus a non-profit group working on behalf of residential customers.

"Wisconsin's model is fairly unique. Along with Oregon, we're in one of just two states that rely solely on a non-profit organization to represent customers' interests," said Content. "In a state with higher-than-average rates it's critical to retain the lone voice speaking out for homeowners, renters and small businesses. The new state budget takes a needed step toward ensuring that customers have an even stronger voice working for them in the years ahead."

CUB said it was appreciative of the support it received from a variety of energy industry stakeholders and for the testimony of PSC Chair Ellen Nowak before the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee.