

Barnes announces plan to rein in utility rates

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Dem gubernatorial candidate Mandela Barnes is pledging to only appoint members to the PSC who would freeze utility rates.

He also vowed to seek a change in state law to cap the salaries of utility executives as part of a plan he released today to reduce costs for consumers.

“Utility companies have rigged the system to boost their profits and pay for the massive salaries of wealthy executives while Wisconsinites have had to cut back on essentials like food and prescriptions to keep the heat on,” Barnes said yesterday.

Utility rates have become a national issue, and WisPolitics reported late last year that Gov. Tony Evers’ appointments to the PSC approved \$2.2 billion in rate increases after becoming a majority of the commission.

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State law requires the PSC to approve rates that allow utilities to cover reasonable costs and give them the opportunity to turn a profit. Barnes’ campaign cited utility profits and executive pay in arguing that they can “make money without hammering ratepayers with another massive price hike.” The campaign didn’t otherwise address how his pledge would fit with existing law.

[Barnes’ plan](#) also includes a vow to pass legislation banning utilities from using ratepayer money for lobbying and political expenses.

The plan also includes:

- Banning utilities from requiring ratepayers to cover debts of shuttered power plants; by year’s end, Wisconsinites will own more than \$1 billion in “stranded

assets,” facilities that have been closed, but still have remaining debt.

- Building more renewable energy.
- Passing tax cuts to help property owners with energy efficiency projects.
- Eliminating reconnection fees for low-income households.

Anika Rickard, a spokesperson for the state GOP, knocked Barnes’ plan, saying prices increased dramatically during the tenure of the former lieutenant governor and Evers.

“Barnes’ fingerprints are all over the current price increases we’re seeing,” she said. “Freezing prices doesn’t solve the slew of problems he created as Lieutenant Governor.”

If he wins this fall, Barnes would have the opportunity to quickly follow through on his pledge to only appoint commissioners who will freeze rates shortly after being sworn in.

Chair Summer Strand is the only one of the three commissioners who has been confirmed by the GOP-controlled state Senate with a term that ends in March 2029.

Evers also appointed the other two members, who haven’t been confirmed by the state Senate. Marcus Hawkins was appointed to a term through March 2027 and Kristy Nieto to one through March 2031. But absent Senate confirmation, the next governor could replace them upon taking office.