

Consumer Advocacy Takes Leap Forward

Gov. Tony Evers Signs Bipartisan PSC Bill, AB 27, into Law

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More Information:
Tom Content 414-550-4712

MADISON, APRIL 1, 2021 — The Citizens Utility Board of Wisconsin on Thursday released the following statement after Gov. Tony Evers signed Assembly Bill 27 into law as Wisconsin Act 24. The law, which the Legislature passed with unanimous bipartisan support this month, enables stable funding for CUB's work as the consumer advocate for homeowners, renters and small business utility customers in Wisconsin.

"Today marks the biggest step forward for consumer advocacy in Wisconsin since 1979, when the Legislature passed the original bill fulfilling Ralph Nader's vision by creating CUB," said Tom Content, CUB Executive Director. "With stable funding, CUB will be better positioned as it works to level the playing field between utility shareholders and customers involving multi-billion-dollar decisions made by state regulators."

The new law enables CUB to seek Public Service Commission approval for up to \$900,000 a year in funding from residential and small business customers of Wisconsin's investor-owned utilities, at a cost of less than 2 pennies a month on a customer's electric bill.

Wisconsinites will still be paying less than their Midwestern counterparts for consumer advocacy. But, this boost will enable CUB to hire a staff attorney and analysts to evaluate utilities' finances and proposals to increase customer costs, and represent Wisconsin residents and small businesses more effectively over a broader range of utility issues.

"Act 24 was needed to resolve an unintended consequence of a 2018 law that restricted CUB's ability to hire national consultants to advocate for customer interests. With Act 24, CUB can build a nimbler team that will produce millions in savings for customers in the years ahead," Content said.

CUB anticipates that Act 24 will also provide the opportunity for more consumer outreach and education on energy costs and energy choices, as well as increased advocacy on behalf of low-income customers who have been hit hard by COVID-19 economic challenges.

"It's been quite a journey for CUB to get to this day. There were concerns that residential and small business customers would be left without a voice after the Legislature slashed funding for CUB six years ago," Content said. "But strong support from our loyal members sustained us, and a collaborative approach with utilities, regulators and others has borne fruit, leading to the funding stability enabled by Act 24."

“I appreciate that Gov. Evers supported our work as the Wisconsin consumer advocate by including the CUB funding modernization plan in his 2021-23 state budget proposal as a backstop to AB 27,” Content said. “CUB wishes to thank the leaders and members of the Assembly and Senate utilities committees for their work shepherding the PSC Omnibus Bill, which won unanimous approval in both committees as well as the full Legislature.”

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic difficulties it’s created for many, CUB appreciates the steps taken by the Evers administration to direct aid to small businesses and renters hard hit by the pandemic, including a new Emergency Rental Assistance Program, a plan to create a low-income assistance program for water utility customers and the Governor’s announcement this week of \$600 million in support for small businesses.

“Given the expiration of the disconnection moratorium on April 15, CUB calls on Wisconsin utilities to work proactively with customers who are behind on their bills,” Content said. “And we encourage the Evers administration to allocate funds to help customers pay significant past-due energy and water bills,” Content said.

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The Citizens Utility Board is a member-supported, nonprofit organization that advocates for efficient and reliable utility service at the lowest rates possible consistent with sound business principles. CUB represents the interests of Wisconsin’s residential, farm, and small business customers of electric and natural gas utilities before the Legislature, state and federal regulatory agencies, and the courts.