

Hartford Courant

Thousands support petition demanding CT dump public benefits charge on energy bills

A coalition of state lawmakers say they are demanding changes too

Stephen Underwood, August 12, 2024



More than 30,000 people have signed on to a petition demanding Gov. Ned Lamont and the state Public Utilities Regulation Authority bring down soaring energy bills that brought sticker-shock to ratepayers across the state.

A petition on change.org is nearing its goal of 35,000 signatures to remove the “public benefits” charge on electric bills in the state, hoping to bring down energy bill costs. The petition, started by Monroe resident Scott Pearson, received more than 2,000 signatures just on Saturday.

The public benefits charge covers everything from energy efficiency programs, solar and electric vehicle incentives, financial aid to needy customers, and the purchase of renewable and carbon-free electricity. But several people have criticized what they say is its lack of transparency.

Further, a coalition of state lawmakers has said they are demanding changes that would save state residents money on skyrocketing power bills. Energy companies also have said the multiple heat waves this summer have added to business

and residential power bills. Regulators and energy companies have been at odds for months over earnings and a program, under which the electric utilities are required to subsidize a transition to electric vehicles by providing rebates to customers who install charging equipment.

Pearson, who shared a photo of his July Eversource bill, said he was charged \$200 in “public benefits” with a total energy bill of \$952. He said he lives in a “normal size house” in Monroe and is urging the state to take action.

Sticker-shock over soaring energy bills began July 1, when the public benefits charge saw many ratepayers paying more than double. The typical home was charged \$12.43 for “public benefits” on Jan. 1, compared to \$58.98 a month starting July 1, according to reporting by the Courant.

“I’m pissed about my Eversource bill this month. Mine doubled,” New Britain Mayor Erin Stewart said in a video posted on X. She attributed the rise to the monthly “public benefits” charge that spiked by more than \$45 this summer.

Amid growing and fast-moving debate this month over rising energy bills, a group of moderate Democrats in the state's General Assembly are seeking big changes to bring rates down.

"The current system is broken and we need to take a hard look at how we can reform our energy delivery model to make it fairer and more sustainable for ratepayers. No one should have to pay someone else's electric bill. I am committed to providing immediate relief to ratepayers, holding energy companies accountable, and looking for a long-term fix to our energy mode," said **State Rep. Chris Poulos** in a statement.

Poulos has joined a handful of other Democrats, including state Reps. Ron Napoli Jr., Larry Butler and Michael DiGiovancarlo, and state Sen. Joan Hartley who are joining colleagues in the Moderate Caucus calling for reforms to bring down energy bills.

The moderate caucus is composed of a group of 24 moderate Democrats or "Connecticut Blue Dogs" that are self-described fiscal conservatives. The moderate caucus said it advocates within the House Democratic Caucus for fiscal responsibility, transparency, and common-sense policy, according to the group.

"I am proud to collaborate with like-minded legislators, and fully support the solutions for long-term stability and competition in our electric bills that have been proposed by the House Moderate Caucus," **Poulos** said.

The group is advocating for competition in electricity delivery by creating a way for towns to leave the state's two largest energy providers, Eversource or United, Illuminating and do aggregate purchasing independently. Meanwhile, Energy giant Avangrid has turned up the heat in a continuing dispute with Connecticut utility regulators, accusing Gov. Ned Lamont's appointee to run the state regulatory authority of bias and demanding that she be removed from a rate case involving two Avangrid gas subsidiaries.

"These companies are monopolies that need pressure from competition," the caucus said in a joint statement.

In addition, the caucus said it would like to revisit the deregulation policy of 1998 and allow utilities to generate power in a major change from the state's current laws. The group also said they would like to see the public benefit fee on electric bills be used as a tax write-off.

"In 2017, I was not a member of the General Assembly when the Millstone Nuclear legislation was passed into law, which is now reflected in 77% of the public benefits charge on our utility bills. Nonetheless, I did not seek public office to point fingers. Instead, we need to work in a bipartisan manner to address the challenging issues in front of us. We need an entirely new approach to energy policy that doesn't take advantage of ratepayers," state Rep. Ron Napoli Jr. said in a statement.

Stephen Underwood can be reached at sunderwood@courant.com