Viewpoint: Oklahoma Corporation Commission is failing consumers on utility price hikes

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In the matter of the February Freeze and utility costs, the Oklahoma Corporation Commission (OCC) is failing us.

OCC's own "Vision" promises to "hold itself and utilities accountable to the citizens of Oklahoma," but it allows secrecy and evades answering public questions.

VOICE is a coalition of churches and community groups concerned about issues affecting families, so we looked at OCC documents. Utilities don't profit from the February price spikes, so why secrecy? In the middle of the freeze, Oklahoma Natural Gas (ONG) asked the OCC on Feb. 16 to keep all price records secret. The OCC said yes after just 48 hours. We now know that ONG put Oklahomans in debt by an extra $1.3 billion in just nine days. VOICE filed questions asking whether ONG paid these extreme prices to
related companies, or suppliers who were contracted to provide low-priced gas on those days.

The OCC "Mission" is to "balance the rights and needs of citizens" with the utilities, but so far utilities have gotten most of what they ask for, and the consumers pay-up for 25 years.

If price spikes are due to "market forces" and "volatility," then that's the risk that utility shareholders willingly accept. The citizen consumers expect stable bills. If OCC does not emphasize "accountability" or penalize bad utility management, there is no motivation for utilities to improve for the future.

VOICE made the common-sense suggestion that when home energy prices spike suddenly, consumers should receive real-time updates from utilities. Imagine how much more conservation would have occurred in February if utilities (as they knew) said "your price for energy tomorrow is going up by 500%." However, OCC has dismissed this idea; it's another example of OCC favoring monopoly corporations over consumers.

The securitization scheme is not a solution. It just provides the model to allow price-gouging payoffs to happen again.
Consumers will keep paying for the two weeks of extreme energy prices for 25 years, even if the utility goes out of business, or energy prices drop to new lows. Securitization means the OCC must approve fee increases every six months, at the utility's request.

The OCC fails to look ahead to reducing repeated problems, and enforcing transparency.

Although commissioners have the expertise and data to create solutions, the OCC priority has been getting money to utilities, rather than a "balance" to protect consumers. When our elected officials define their role narrowly, rather than advocating for the citizens, it is disappointing.

OCC conducts a charade of "public comment" without engaging in dialogue or providing answers.

For the ONG case, the date for public comment was Monday, Nov. 22. But the OCC signed off on a settlement with ONG on Thursday, Nov. 18, with a strategically delayed announcement at 6:30 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 19. So, public commenters were left feeling powerless and disrespected by their elected representatives.

Just three elected officials at OCC will decide on raising your utility bills for 25 years. Call two of them to express your opinion at 405-521-2211.