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## Inured to inflation?

# Edison rate hike request draws ho-hum response at public hearings

By TIM RICHARD

They held a public hearing and practically nobody came.

They held a second public hearing and no one at all came.

They, in this case, is the Michigan Public Service Commission, which is deciding whether to grant Detroit Edison Co. electric rate increases averaging 8.6 per cent.

Irving Bluestone, a vice-president of the United Auto Workers and head of its political arm, CAP, held a press conference Wednesday to say the union advocates a "lifeline" rate system for residential customers.

But Bluestone himself never showed up for the actual hearing, held at 1:30 p.m. on the Orchard Ridge Campus of Oakland Community College in Farmington Hills.

Instead, he sent Peter Eckstein, an economist in the UAW's research department.

THAT EVENING at 7:30, no one spoke at all for or against Edison's rate request. Robert E. Hollenshead, the PSC's administrative law judge,

waited for a half-hour, threw the program open to questions, and finally got one bite.

Dennis McCoy, a notebook-carrying young man from Walled Lake, asked the PSC if it had the capacity to offer management advice to Edison.

Lenora Sculthorpe, senior member of the three-person PSC, said no—"it's against the statute. We act only on the evidence presented. We are not to substitute our management judgment for the company's."

Later he added, "We don't have the right to order, but we can make a rate adjustment to hit 'em in the pocketbook."

Willie Mae King, newest member of the PSC, added, "We don't have the power to manage. But you do indirectly what you can't do directly," she said, referring to the rate structure. And she added that the PSC's consumer service division will investigate complaints about bad service.

Missing was the PSC's chairman, Daniel Demelow, who was in Minneapolis attending a solar heating con-

ference. Other PSC officials said the Edison case would be decided by next April 20.

THE FARMINGTON hearings last Wednesday were among three scheduled in southeast Michigan. Others were set in Detroit and Port Huron.

The PSC has held hearings at Orchard Ridge in the past. More than a year ago, 2,000 persons packed a room for a rate hearing on Michigan Bell Telephone Co. The late Lou Gordon, the television personality, advertised his own appearance and helped stir up the crowd.

Sculthorpe remembered the excitement a little wistfully. After Gordon and his fans left, Sculthorpe recalled, the audience and the PSC had a serious and interesting discussion of the case.

Sculthorpe expressed disappointment the turnout was so low in the Edison case. He said the PSC had been criticized for holding hearings in downtown Detroit, "so we decided to hold them in both places—Detroit and the suburbs."

Detroit Edison had published a half-page legal ad in the daily newspapers, and Observer & Eccentric Newspapers published a news story announcing the hearings.

EDISON IS seeking rate increases that would bring in about \$129 million in new revenues. Current rates will bring in an estimated \$142 billion in revenue.

The cost squeeze has reduced profits, Edison complained, so that the southeastern Michigan utility has had "to halt all field construction of its power plants and sharply curtail transmission and distribution facility construction."

It said it's earning much less than the 13.5 per cent return on equity authorized by the PSC.

The proposed rate increases would amount to 8.1 per cent for domestic customers, 9.83 for commercial-secondary, 8.5 for industrial, 8.87 for municipal street lighting and 542 per

cent for steam and water customers.

THE UAW's Eckstein explained the union's "lifeline" plan:

"Each family would be allowed to use a basic—or lifeline—amount of electricity at a rate substantially lower than that currently being charged. The size of the 'lifeline' would not be uniform for each household, as in the present inverted rates, but would be larger for larger families."

"Amounts of electricity used above the 'lifeline' amounts would pay a rate substantially higher than currently being charged. Thus, families would pay less for necessary use of electricity and more for luxury use."

For example, a lifeline rate would be reduced from the present 3.85 cents per kilowatt hour to three cents per kWh. The rate for use beyond the lifeline amount would be increased to six cents per kWh from the current 4.15 to 4.45 cents.

Eckstein added: "The Detroit Edison proposal would substantially raise the cost of basic uses of electricity without doing nearly enough to curtail marginal uses. Instead, we need to make it cheaper for a family to operate an electric stove and refrigerator, to light the rooms it is currently occupying and to watch some television."

"We need to make it more expensive, however, to leave the lights on in rooms that aren't being used, to cool the house to 65 degrees in summer and to leave the color TV on all day, whether or not anyone is watching."

The UAW also criticized the rate structures for business use of electricity for failing to encourage conservation. "Such rates typically include large fixed charges and charges tied to a firm's single hour of peak use, but they provide very low rates for the use of electricity at all the other hours of the month," Eckstein said.

## Tax break extended

Older taxpayers may now want to amend their 1976 federal returns to claim a retirement income credit that has now been extended through 1978, the Internal Revenue Service suggested this week.

The Tax Reduction and Simplification Act of 1977, gives some taxpayers the option of reducing their tax liability for 1976 by choosing either the new tax credit for the elderly or the former retirement income credit. Previously, under the Tax Reform Act of 1976, the retirement income credit could not be used on 1976 tax returns since it was replaced by the tax credit for the elderly.

The IRS also advises taxpayers who claimed the tax credit for the elderly on their 1976 returns to consider recomputing their taxes to determine whether they could get a larger credit

under former retirement income credit provisions.

In general, taxpayers over age 65 with larger incomes which substantially limit or completely eliminate eligibility for the tax credit for the elderly will benefit by electing the retirement income credit. Also, married individuals who filed separate returns and lived with their spouses at any time during the year are not permitted to claim the tax credit for the elderly. Taxpayers in this situation may, however, be eligible for the retirement income credit.

Amended returns (Form 1040X) and new retirement income credit computation forms-1976 Schedule RIC (Form 1040), are available at local IRS offices.

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