

Teacher fights utility rate boost

By CORINNE ABATT

Without little fanfare or financial backing, a group of the Consumers Alliance of Michigan are quietly fighting the battle of the purse.

One outspoken leader of the alliance is Lynn Ehrle of Westland, social studies and consumer and career education teacher at Franklin Junior High School in Wayne.

As chairperson of the alliance's energy committee, Ehrle has been attending public hearings on utility rate requests, appearing on radio

and television and doing a lot of writing on his findings.

He describes the three year old non-profit, non-partisan alliance as dealing with consumer issues at the state level.

IN HIS work in the utilities field, Ehrle has found what he feels are many inequities.

One of these is the money which the companies use "for witness and lawyer fees to build the rate cases." Unfair, Ehrle says because the money for these comes from the consumer and is included in the costs which the

companies present as a reason for a rate increase.

The alliance, on the other hand, has no funds to intervene in these cases. Presently, the alliance has several hundred members who paid \$8 each to join and this barely covers the regular newsletter mailing.

Ehrle would like to see the state Public Service Commission collect funds from the utility companies for an intervention fund available on a continuing basis.

Admitting that State Atty. Gen. Frank J. Kelley "has been supportive to a certain extent" in opposing the rate hikes, Ehrle says, "Kelley has a two hat deal. He represents the Public Service Commission and also the public."

"That is a difficult position to be placed in."

Since the three members of the commission are appointed by the governor and have the final word on rate increases, Ehrle says, "The Consumers Alliance of Michigan holds the governor directly responsible for this sorry state."

EHRLE DESCRIBES the things which the alliance feels have created the "sorry state" - over \$3 million in rate increases in the past two years, race and sex discrimination in certain utilities; billing which most people don't understand, and the "April 24 massacre." On that date Detroit Edison asked for a \$93 million rate hike, Michigan Bell asked for \$111 million and Consumers Power \$72 million. "All on the same day," Ehrle notes.

He mentions the petition now before the commission to eliminate utility company advertising.

Ehrle defends the petition pointing out that utilities have a guaranteed rate of return and monopolistic service areas.

"Why do they need advertising with these guarantees?"

His research tells him that Edison ads are "not informative, but an argument for another rate increase."

He describes what he calls a "damned if we do, damned if we don't, situation the public is caught in."

Consumers have been urged to conserve energy. When less is used, profits decrease, the company makes less money and then goes after a rate increase. Ehrle calls the regular rate increases "piggyback refills."

THE CONSTRUCTION of nuclear

power plants is "a whole new ballgame," he said.

"It's the nuclear power questions that are crucial. We are condemning our children to be watch dogs for nuclear waste."

Ehrle's interest is not solely in the immediate problems but "in the issues in the broad perspective of the quality of life."

He mentions both site and radiation problems which some nuclear plants in the state have encountered as well as the disposal of nuclear wastes.

ANOTHER THING that bothers Ehrle is the notification and location of the public hearings which the utility companies schedule.

By law they must hold public hearings. But Ehrle says that in a recent Edison hearing, the notice was in the paper about a month before the hearing and only five or six people showed up.

He would like to have the commission require utilities to notify customers of the hearings on the monthly bill.

There will be a public hearing on the Michigan Bell rate increase request at the Veterans Memorial

Bldg. in Detroit at 9:30 a.m. Monday, June 17 and 7:30 p.m. the same day.

Gas rate increases will be aired at a public hearing at the City County Bldg. in Detroit starting at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday, June 18.

One answer to the problem, Ehrle feels, would be to have more people and groups involved in the alliance. Instead of 400, he would like to see more like 25,000 members. This kind of massive citizen participation would help give the group much needed clout.

Those interested may contact the Consumers Alliance of Michigan, Box 1021 A, Detroit 48222.

Ehrle has also written a book, "Consumer Rights: Battle in the Marketplace."


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Low turnout elects a new C'ville trustee

Clarencville School District voters returned incumbent Robert M. Erickson to a third term on the board of education and elected Daniel G. Morrison to replace trustee Melvin O. Kuehn.

A total of only 284 votes was cast, 4.8 per cent of the 5,896 eligible.

THE VOTE was Erickson, 155; Morrison, 128; Kuehn, 113; and Mary E. Lauter, 112.

The pre-election campaign was as lackluster as the voter turnout. None of the four candidates for the two four-year terms either issued press releases or spoke publicly.

"Mostly there were no major issues," commented superintendent David McDowell. "There just were no particular issues."

Erickson, 38, greeted his reelection saying: "I look forward to four more years hoping the board comes up with some interesting curriculum programs and that all work hard for the community and the kids."

MORRISON, 44, said "The only thing which, as the Observer and Eccentric nicely put it recently, is that I have a great deal to learn."


"I intend to sit, to learn and to find out all about board affairs. I will do the best I can to help make Clarencville the best school district in the state."

Erickson is an administrator for the College of Lifelong Learning, which offers university extension classes of Wayne State University.

Morrison is an employee of the Great American Insurance Co.

Kuehn, 51, a Chrysler Corp. engineer, is serving his first term as trustee.

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