

Opinion: New year, new energy grid?

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Greater Philadelphia residents have a powerful new neighbor this year: Manu Asthana, the new CEO of PJM Interconnection. Based in Valley Forge, PJM operates the nation's largest power grid and energy market, keeping the lights on and the power flowing for 65 million people across 13 states and Washington, D.C. Mr. Asthana has a big job ahead of him.

Despite being neighbors, PJM isn't exactly a household name for folks in our area. But as Mr. Asthana starts work this year, there are a few things he should know.

The Philadelphia region faces a giant gulf between the haves and the have-nots. We're home to one of the nation's poorest large cities, where more than a quarter of residents can't afford their energy bills. A struggling family here spends almost 10% of their income on electricity. The situation has become so dire that state regulators are proposing to put an extra \$102 million into bill assistance programs — and even that may not be enough.

About a fifth of what residents pay for energy generation comes from PJM's "capacity" market, where generators get paid for their promise to be online to meet future energy needs and emergencies. The problem, according to experts, is that Mr. Asthana's predecessors have purchased far more of this cushion than we would ever need. Consumers are left on the hook for this excess to the tune of at least \$1.1 billion dollars a year. And most of that money props up polluting fossil fuel plants.

What's worse, federal regulators just approved PJM's proposal to hand a special market advantage to sources like gas and coal, a bailout of fossil fuels that will likely leave local consumers paying an *additional* \$6 a month on their electricity bills. The new rule makes renewables artificially more expensive; many of these clean energy providers come from right here in Southeastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Higher bills aren't the only threat to our region. For many families, the climate crisis is happening now: entire neighborhoods are being displaced by flooding, and students robbed of an education by debilitating heat and storms. My constituents of color face disproportionate rates of pollution-related asthma and cancer. They're also why I introduced ambitious, bipartisan legislation to transition Pennsylvania to 100% clean energy by 2050. They're also why Gov. Wolf has put our state on track — as the nation's largest gas producer — to join our neighbors in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative.

With President Trump pulling us out of the Paris climate agreement, these local steps are the best we can do to slow the impact of climate change, and provide our region with a sustainable economic boost. As the operator of the most powerful energy market in America, PJM can make or break our efforts.

In the 1990s, PJM ushered us from the era of energy monopolies, when Pennsylvania's electric rates were 15% above the national average, to the more competitive markets we have today. With that same innovative spirit, PJM can evolve our energy system to meet the challenges of the next 30 years.

As Mr. Asthana settles into his new role, I would ask him to do three things on behalf of my constituents:

Work more closely with me and my fellow state policymakers to create energy solutions that benefit all Pennsylvanians; Make sure that renewable energy sources are valued properly in PJM's markets, not only for their versatility, but for the money they save states in defrayed health and environmental costs; and Revamp PJM's markets to make sure consumers are not paying for excess, dirty energy they don't need.

I am hopeful that under Mr. Asthana's leadership, PJM will be a driving force toward the clean, affordable energy future we need--instead of a roadblock. On behalf of all of us in the General Assembly and the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, we look forward to traveling to that future together.

State Representative Chris Rabb represents the 200th District in Northwest Philadelphia, is a founding member of the PA House Climate Caucus and a board member of the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators. Contact him via reprabb@pahouse.net.