

**LD 839, "An Act to Lower Consumer Electricity Costs by Prohibiting
the Recovery Through Rates of Costs Attributable to Net Energy Billing"**

**Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology
March 27, 2025**

Senator Lawrence, Representative Sachs and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology:

I am Trey Stewart; and I represent Senate District 2, which includes several municipalities in Penobscot and Aroostook Counties. I am here today to present LD 839, "An Act to Lower Consumer Electricity Costs by Prohibiting the Recovery Through Rates of Costs Attributable to Net Energy Billing."

Passage of this measure would prevent transmission and distribution utilities from including certain net energy billing (NEB) program costs in their operating expenses. Instead, it would establish a dedicated fund to receive general fund appropriations to pay NEB program costs, less monetized benefit, and direct the PUC to establish a process for the distribution of those funds.

Around the State House, you hear the words "transparency" and "fairness" often. Most of us believe that citizens have a fundamental right to know and understand what their government is doing. Transparency. And most of us also agree that when the government enacts policies that cost money, it should do so with a keen eye towards the benefit of that policy and who pays for it. Fairness.

Now, whether you like or dislike energy policies promoting renewable generation, collecting the money to pay for those policies is neither transparent nor fair. Every month, Mainers get a bill from their electric utility. Buried in the T&D charge are millions and millions of dollars swiped from electricity users and mostly exported to out-of-state investors in these so-called community solar projects. When that misguided policy first became law, there was a gold rush of greedy developers gobbling up obscene profits at the trough filled to overflowing by already overburdened electric utility customers. Furthermore, the vast majority of the customers paying their bills have no idea that a chunk of the check they send to the utility has zero to do with the service provided by the utility.

Transparency? Doubtful. I challenge each of you to go home and ask your neighbors a simple question: "When you pay your light bill, who gets the money?" A few will know that the

payment is split between the utility delivering the electricity and the generators producing the electricity; but I'll bet anyone here a cup of coffee every day for the rest of this not-so-special-session that not 1 in 10,000 Mainers will include in their reply, "And developers of community solar farms also get paid about five times the actual wholesale cost of electricity."

Some in Augusta may still believe that shortsighted policy made sense, but none can assert that paying for it is transparent. For me, one of the most nefarious parts of the solar tax the 129th Legislature instituted was the way it went about pushing it forward. That legislature said that subsidizing solar was a priority but then failed to pay for it. Instead, they chose to have the utilities be the bad guys who are forced by law to pass along this increase in costs to ratepayers without a requirement to share why their bill went up, who voted for the increase or where the money is going when it leaves their pockets. This program alone can account for a \$100 per month increase to a senior citizen on a fixed income who is now forced to decide whether to keep their lights on or buy prescriptions or other necessities. For businesses across Maine, it can mean an increase in their annual bill of up to a million dollars.

Now, picture your own district for a moment. Most Maine Senate and House districts are as diverse as mine. Some constituents have plenty, while some barely get by. Now, ask yourself – whether you like the renewable policies we have or you despise them – "shouldn't we as policymakers try to distribute the burden of those policies more equitably?" To do so, we need to take these fees off utility bills and put them into the mix funded by the taxes that fill our general fund like we do other policies we think are important. Maine's income taxes are graduated, so those earning more pay a higher rate. Sales taxes, of course, are not progressive; but high earners are more likely to buy new vehicles and durable goods with higher prices. Many people making less buy used and hold vehicles and expensive appliances for a longer period, helping reduce their sales tax burden.

If you believe in the public benefits from the expansion of renewable generation, then let those benefits be paid for by the General Fund. If those benefits are real – as some on this committee have asserted and continue to assert – then let them compete for public dollars like any other public policy. If the benefits cannot withstand the competition for general funds, they should wither and die. As I have said before to this committee, you cannot claim to care about low-income Mainers and support the continued existence of this policy. We must make a change; and I would challenge those who support this policy to finally put their money – or I should say, the taxpayers' money – where their mouth is and pay for it the proper way rather than the indiscriminate tax on Maine people that benefits corporations out of Maine at the direct expense of our people.