

Star-Telegram

Fort Worth, Texas
October 28, 2005

Perry orders program restored

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AUSTIN - Gov. Rick Perry on Thursday ordered a new public information campaign about Texas electric deregulation, even though he signed earlier budgets that sacked a similar program.

Perry said his order would help Texas ratepayers get better electric rates by allowing them to know about marketplace choices under deregulation. "This executive order will help empower Texas ratepayers," he said in a prepared release.

But critics were quick to note that the governor previously signed budgets that had the effect of sacking an earlier customer education program. The stroke of his budget pen also led to increases in electric bills for more than 750,000 low-income electric users, they note.

"I think Texans expect more from a governor than just climbing out of a hole that he dug himself," said Jason Stanford, a spokesman for former U.S. Rep. Chris Bell, who is seeking the Democratic nomination for governor.

The executive order directs the Texas Public Utility Commission to begin a consumer education campaign that advises Texans that they have a choice of electric providers under deregulation, and that service should remain reliable even if they switch to a new company.

A customer education program from the Public Utility Commission ended after the legislature and the governor adopted state budgets that rerouted fees from customer electric bills to the state's general coffers. The loss of those fees also led to the

demise of a program that once provided rate discounts for 780,000 low-income Texans.

Stanford said that with Perry's announcement Thursday, it appeared as if he was attempting to fix problems partially of his own making. However, consumer advocate Randy Chapman noted that Perry initially proposed budgets that preserved the low-income rate discounts and the customer education programs -- but that those budgets did not survive the legislative process.

Perry's executive order will also expedite the permitting process for electric generators at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, according to information from the governor's office. Perry said that TCEQ will continue to carefully guard the environment and public's health.

But Luke Metzger, an advocate for the Texas Public Interest and Research Group, cautioned against reducing public input in environmental matters. "If streamlining the process means less public comment and review, and less attention paid to [environmental] concerns -- then [his order] is a big concern," he said.

Perry's order also directs state administrative law judges to expedite permit hearings for electric plants. Perry said his directive would cut in half the year's time it usually takes those administrative judges to resolve contested applications.

A complete copy of the executive order is available on the governor's website, www.governor.state.tx.us