

EDITORIAL: Appointees to state PUC have big, tough job ahead



California Public Utilities Commissioners Carla Peterman, from left rear, Mike Florio, President Michael Peevey, Catherine Sandoval and Michael Picker listen during public comment as protesters hold up signs against the use of Pacific Gas & Electric Co.'s SmartMeters during a meeting of the five-member commission in San Francisco, Thursday, Dec. 18, 2014.

JEFF CHIU — AP Photo

Gov. Jerry Brown's latest two appointees to the California Public Utilities Commission have their work cut out.

That's especially true of Michael Picker, the incoming president who will replace Michael Peevey, who held the post for the past 12 years. Brown also appointed a veteran of various state jobs, attorney Liane Randolph.

With the latest two appointments, Brown has selected the entire five-member commission. The moment should not be squandered.

Picker is intelligent, diligent and dedicated. He and the commissioners should breathe life into a ponderous agency of 1,000 employees and transform it into an agile and aggressive advocate on behalf of customers of PG&E and the other private utilities. In an interview with us earlier this year, Picker made it clear that he would stand up for rate payers.

The commission is based in San Francisco, where it operates with little oversight by the Legislature. That independence might have served the public well in the past. It doesn't now. Outside watchdogs including the Little Hoover Commission, as well as The Bee Editorial Board, have called for greater oversight and a review of its mission.

Created by initiative in 1911 to oversee railroads, the commission regulates private electric utilities, but not particularly well. The commission failed to properly oversee PG&E safety efforts, as evidenced by the 2010 natural gas explosion on a PG&E line that killed eight people and devastated a San Bruno neighborhood.

Two years earlier, in 2008, a similar explosion killed one person in Rancho Cordova. That should have served as a warning. It didn't. Emails to and from PG&E executives and commission members suggest a cozy relationship, and energy companies helped fund junkets, a practice that ought to end.

The San Bruno investigation dragged on for four years until September when the commission finally levied a \$1.4 billion fine against PG&E. The matter remains tied up in litigation.

Picker says that his top goal in the first year will be to make vast improvements in safety enforcement.

Picker, who oversaw Brown's expansion of solar power plant construction early in the administration, pledges to improve energy efficiency efforts and coordinate expansion of renewable energy in ways that will ensure a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. He also vowed to significantly improve public access by improving the difficult-to-navigate and outdated website. All that is important. But there's more to be done.

An important order of business ought to be to conduct a national search for a new executive director, after its leader of 30 years, Paul Clanon, announced he would be leaving.

The commission asserts some authority over the safety of limousine services and telephone landlines, but has ceded control to the federal government over cellphones, cable television and the digital equivalent of the old common carriers, the Internet.

Although federal law may preempt the state in some ways, California never has shied from asserting the state's rights. It should not shrink from claiming jurisdiction over vital tools of communication and commerce.

If nothing else, the commission could start by aligning itself publicly with consumers and President Barack Obama on questions of net neutrality.

Under Picker and the other Brown appointees, the California Public Utilities Commission should become a model consumer agency, one that helps lead the state toward smart and expanded use of renewable energy. The Senate, which must confirm Picker and Randolph, and the Legislature should be ready to exercise its oversight power if the commission continues to stumble.

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