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TOM WALSH

## Energy bills must pass checkpoint

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State Sen. Bruce Patterson, R-Canton, has a carefully cultivated image as an irascible, cantankerous, bombastic bear of a committee chairman in Lansing. An imposing 6 feet 5, with a twirly white mustache and stubble, Patterson only concedes with a slight smile that he's not as fearsome in everyday life as when he's grilling a hapless witness at a hearing.

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He's in his glory these days, with a pile of controversial energy legislation that must pass through his checkpoint if it's to get to Gov. Jennifer Granholm's desk.

Look for some animated dialogue on this front as early as Thursday, when representatives of Detroit's automakers and other big industrial energy users are slated to testify before Patterson's Energy Policy and Public Utilities Committee.

"Look at this," Patterson said to me over breakfast Friday, pulling out a stack of memos, highlighted with yellow marker and scribbled notes in the margins. "The auto companies say this proposed legislation will mean a 39% increase in electric rates."

Is Patterson skeptical of that claim from the Association of Businesses Advocating Tariff Equity (ABATE), a trade group for large industrial electric customers?

Or is he doubtful that Michigan's two big utilities, DTE Energy and CMS Energy, can successfully peddle legislation that waters down Public Act 141, the 2000 law that ushered in a new era of choice to the state's electric power market?

Patterson's not taking sides. Yet, anyway.

"I like competition," he said, between spoonfuls of oatmeal that he called gruel, "because otherwise a

lethargy can set in, without an incentive to keep their pencils sharp." But he conceded that DTE and CMS may need some assurance of revenue stability to finance new power plants.

He's also concerned about the survival of Michigan's auto industry, as other states and countries offer cheaper power to automakers, asking, "Do I want to see Ford Motor Co. disappear?"

A separate energy bill heading Patterson's way calls for a renewable portfolio standard, or RPS, that would require that a certain percentage of the state's future energy needs be met with wind, solar or other alternatives to fossil fuels.

"I like to incentivize behavior rather than have mandates," he said, expressing concern that mandates could lead to higher electric rates. But he was already musing about a possible compromise. "Maybe," he said, "instead of requiring that a certain percentage of *capacity* be from renewables, we could have it be a percentage of actual average peak demand, which is a much lower number."

At present, Patterson said, there appears to be more consensus around a need for RPS than for the changes in PA 141 sought by the big utilities.

"It's very complex stuff, affecting consumers, auto companies, construction jobs, you name it," he said.


Then Patterson packed his memos and hurried off to meet with Andy Dillon, D-Redford Township, speaker of the Michigan House.

Yes, powerful legislative Republicans are talking to powerful Democrats in search of common ground on this stuff. Who'd have thunk it?

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