

PUC looks to renewable energy

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Less coal and natural gas, less carbon, less telecom regulation.

More renewables, more energy efficiency, more high-speed Internet access.

And an occasional glass of fine wine.

In a nutshell, that's the agenda for Ron Binz, the part-time winery owner and newly appointed full-time chairman of the Colorado Public Utilities Commission.

But before he elaborates, he is quick to state a caveat:

"I am only one of three commissioners; I have only one vote," he said. "I don't speak for the commissioners."

Nonetheless, the 57-year-old Binz expects to be the utility-regulation point man for his appointer, Gov. Bill Ritter, and the renewable-energy platform embraced by Ritter and this year's Colorado General Assembly.

"There's an expectation that the (PUC) chair will carry a banner for the new administration," Binz said.

The new agenda could signal a change from the PUC led by former chairman Greg Sopkin, a Bill Owens appointee. That regime was characterized by an emphasis on lowest-cost power to consumers, with less attention to environmental issues.

For Binz, the two go hand in hand. Coal-fired generation traditionally has been viewed as the cheapest power. But with 54 percent of the nation's carbon-dioxide emissions from burning coal and natural gas, the costs of potential carbon regulation or taxation could change the economics of fossil-fuel power.

"I'm cognizant of society's concern about the future of carbon emissions," he said. "That will affect every energy decision we make."

In addition to a shift to renewable power sources, Binz expects the PUC to ask utilities for more conservation and energy-efficiency programs that would help consumers use less energy without sacrificing comfort.

On the telecommunications side, he said increasing competition in phone services should lead to a continuation of the PUC's path toward less regulation.

"Colorado has over 20 independent phone companies, and too much regulation is burdensome for these smaller companies," Binz said. "I expect that our streamlining of regulation will continue."

Better access to high-speed Internet in rural areas also will be a PUC mandate.

"Broadband is becoming to today's customers what basic phone service used to be - a necessity," he said. "Gov. Ritter sees the connection between economic development and access to high-speed Internet services."

Binz established a populist reputation when he served from 1984 to 1995 as the first director of the Office of Consumer Counsel, the state's top utility watchdog.

Renewable-energy advocates packed a PUC hearing room in January for his swearing-in as commission chairman.

Binz critics are hard to find, perhaps, as Binz wryly notes, because they may one day become parties in PUC decisions.

His confirmation as chairman passed the Colorado Senate on a 34-1 vote, with the lone dissenter Republican Sen. Ron May of El Paso County.

But May's opposition was because of Binz's high-profile role in supporting Amendment 41, the government ethics measure passed in November by Colorado voters, not because of his utility-regulation ideas.

"He's extremely well-qualified to run the PUC," May said. "But because of his role in the passage of Amendment 41, I think that was poorly put together and will destroy representative government in Colorado."

Supporters include Howard Geller, executive director of the Boulder-based Southwest Energy Efficiency Project.

"I expect that Commissioner Binz will look at energy-efficient improvements as a legitimate resource that should be compared fairly with (power generation)," Geller said.

Meanwhile, wine enthusiast Binz said he hopes to find enough spare time to monitor operations at Loveland-based Trail Ridge Winery, where he serves as managing partner.

Competition and marginal economics in Colorado's young wine industry can make utilities look easy by comparison.

"But we had a good year last year," Binz noted with a smile. "We didn't lose too much money."

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