

LIVE CHAT

Weather Channel meteorologist takes blizzard questions

Share

Tweet

22 Comments

Charlie Baker's challenge: keeping power affordable — and green

| JANUARY 27, 2015

IN ITS latest warning about the Commonwealth's inadequate energy grid, ISO New England last week said the region "may not have all the resources we need to meet peak demand for power in the very near future." Governor Charlie Baker should take that as an admonition to make good on his campaign promise to pursue a "balanced approach" to lowering some of the highest energy costs in the nation while still keeping the state on track to diversify its energy sources.

To bring down high energy prices, the region needs to upgrade natural gas pipelines that are too small to handle the new volumes of cheap gas flowing from shale states, especially in peak winter cold. A key mission of the state Department of Public Utilities is to ensure "the most reliable service at the lowest possible cost," and for now, the cheapest fuel is natural gas.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

But Baker cannot let the pursuit of cheap fuel, supported by many of his allies in the business community, or the possible importing of hydroelectric power from Canada, slow the development of wind and solar energy. On that score, the young administration is still saying the right things. In an interview, new Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Matt Beaton vowed that the new administration will not turn its back on the Commonwealth's nation-leading efforts in energy efficiency, and will hew to the Patrick administration's goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions 25 percent by 2020 and 80 percent by 2050. Beaton also

promised to remain in the nine-state Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, the nation's first program to cap power plant emissions and re-invest proceeds from auctions of pollution permits into clean energy programs.

It is encouraging that the Baker administration is taking ownership of these goals — and that Beaton seems willing to go further in some areas. He said his office will look at what he calls “energy justice” programs to assure that solar energy and energy efficiency efforts that have worked well in suburbs and smaller towns spread to low-income neighborhoods.

Ratepayers should be clear that there is no inexpensive or convenient solution, especially in a six-state region that shares a grid, but in which Massachusetts consumes nearly half of the energy. Natural gas would be cheaper with adequate pipeline capacity, and is much cleaner than oil or coal. But it is still a fossil fuel; overreliance on gas will eventually blunt the state's emissions goals.

It will cost billions to build enough pipeline to open up the current bottlenecks, and some pipeline proposals have met community resistance from the Berkshires to West Roxbury. Wind energy from remote areas of northern New England could replace some of the energy the region will lose over the next several years as old plants are retired.

Baker's task is to bring online just enough fossil fuel to drive costs down, while creating the space for renewables to thrive. That is the “balanced” approach Massachusetts needs.

[SHOW 22 COMMENTS](#)