

M | MONDAY | MARCH 10, 2008 | ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH | STLOUJAV.COM | C9

OTHER VIEWS



Jonah Goldberg's column is off today.

MORE LETTERS ONLINE "When will educators, boards of education and the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education start serving the interests of Missouri students, their taxpaying parents and residents and their districts' voters instead of carrying water for the districts and institutions?" asks George J. Gladis of St. Louis County. Read and talk about this letter and more letters online at STLOUJAV.com/letters.

Monday • Jonah Goldberg, Paul Krugman Tuesday • David Brooks, Matthew Good Wednesday • Bob Herbert, David Ignatius Thursday • Kathleen Parker Saturday • Ben Gouvion Sunday • Charles Krauthammer, Leonard Pitts

PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

New environmental-cost rule will help utilities and consumers

By Jeff Davis

A recent Post-Dispatch editorial failed to capture or to convey the importance of the Missouri Public Service Commission's approval of a way for utilities to recover the cost of complying with environmental requirements. Our approval of an environmental cost recovery mechanism — referred to within the field as ECRM — is important not just to Missouri utilities but also to the consumers who benefit from the efficiency of service those utilities provide.

equipment to comply with new federal mandates. The federal carbon regulations supported by the Post-Dispatch in previous editorials could cost ratepayers billions more. When the utilities we regulate show up on the PSC's docket asking Missourians to write bigger checks every month, the ECRM is a tool we can choose to use when evaluating those rate hikes. Consumers — and the environment — will be served better because we are removing the incentive utilities have to oppose us, tougher environmental regulations. Although some people believe otherwise, I think the ECRM will speed the installation of new pollution control devices because utilities will know they can recover the cost of doing so. At the same time, consumers will know what



Jeff Davis

clearer environment is costing them and know the reason for any added expense. An informed electorate is essential to our system of government, and it will be just as indispensable as our state and nation move from an extended period of cheap electricity to one in which every kilowatt counts. The Post-Dispatch editorial would have been more informative if it had mentioned that ECRM charges are limited to upgrades required by law, are limited to 2.5 percent of a utility's

revenue and only may be implemented in a regular rate case in which the PSC considers the entire rate structure of the company, its revenues and expenses. The PSC is required by Missouri law to allow utilities to recover their prudently incurred costs, plus the opportunity to earn a fair return on that investment. Rather than bundling up the costs and handing them to the ratepayers in one big bill, the PSC could use the way to phase in a rate increase and actually save consumers money in the process. Missouri's energy infrastructure is aging. Because Missouri is so dependent on coal — 84 percent — for the generation of electricity, we must aggressively pursue every legitimate way to meet our increasing demand for electricity in an

environmentally responsible manner as quickly as possible. It's easy to say you support policies to clean up our environment when you don't have to ask the price: the elderly on fixed income and Missouri businesses trying to compete in a global marketplace to pay for it. In the United States, that responsibility has been delegated by policy makers to agencies such as the Missouri PSC. We can't prevent these sorts of expenses from driving up your utility bills, but we can work to minimize the effect of government-imposed mandates. If used properly, the environmental cost recovery mechanism guidelines adopted by the PSC could help us do that.

Jeff Davis is chairman of the Missouri Public Service Commission.

SOCIETY

Predicting the future



Keeping pace with the pace of change is impossible.

By Terrence Freeman

I often ask my students what they want their lives to be like in 10 years. It's almost an impossible question because so much can change in that time, but I still want them to think about possibilities, goals and choices. I want them to think about responsibility and commitment. Every time I advise a student, I also reflect on the accelerating change of the last 10 years. In early 1998, Clarence Harmon was the mayor of St. Louis and Bruce Woodfall was St. Louis County executive. Our governor was Mel Carnahan, and our senators were Kit Bond and John Ashcroft. President Clinton had not yet been impeached, and no one expected that Texas Gov. George W. Bush would be the next president of the United States. A 36-year-old Barack Obama had served in the Illinois Senate for only a year. Internationally, Benazir Bhutto had been out of office as prime minister of Pakistan for less than two years, and Pervez Musharraf had not yet become a general. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was an engineering professor in Tehran. Boris Yeltsin was the president of the Russian Federation, and Vladimir Putin was deputy chief of presidential staff. Africa still was reeling from the Rwandan genocide, the world did not yet know Darfur. In early 1998, there was no TV or XM Satellite radio. The "state of the art" Pentium II chip was running Windows 95 and dot-coms were the rage. We weren't text messaging in the United States, PDAs were in their infancy and no one owned a BlackBerry. DVD players and movies on disc were less than a year old. MP3 files were being shared on the Internet, but Napster had not yet become the first major peer-to-peer online file-sharing network. High definition television receivers soon would become available, albeit at prohibitively high prices. Digital cameras were changing the science, though not the art, of photography. There was no "American Idol"; no one was being voted off of islands, Pluto still was a planet and the Kyoto Protocol was just a few months old. Our world changes fast and in unpredictable ways, and the pace is not slowing. What will we be doing in 10 years? It's impossible to say with precision, of course, but calendars and human nature allow us to

know some things: By 2008, the winner of our upcoming presidential election will have been out of office for at least a year, maybe five. Danger still will exist in the world, and somewhere there will be devastating and incomprehensible tragedy. For some of us, marital status will change from "y" to "m" to "d" and maybe back to "m." Some of today's children will be graduates of high schools, colleges, technical training centers, medical and law schools, graduate programs and military academies. Some of us will retire, some will change jobs and some will move into careers that have not yet been invented. We will lose loved ones and welcome new additions to our extended families. We will be surrounded by remarkable new technologies. The Interstate 64 construction will be behind us — optimism reigns — as will many of the goals we are pursuing today. Through it all, there are some values, goals and opportunities that should not change. We can assume greater responsibility for our decisions. We can choose to lead healthier lives. We can take greater care to make wise financial decisions. We can respect and protect the environment for those who will come after us. We can discover, rediscover and share with others the Zoo, the Art Museum, the Missouri History Museum, the Missouri Botanical Garden, the Science Center, the Black Rep and other vibrant local theater companies, the Many and dozens of other treasures. We can make a difference in the life of a child who may grow up to become another King, Gandhi or Mother Teresa. Kind words, smiles, embraces, compliments, constructive criticism and collaboration are abundant resources — and renewable. We can make a difference in the bigger things if we start with the smaller things, the things we can control. Where do you want to be in 10 years? I hope to see you there. Terrence Freeman of Spanish Lake is an engineering professor at St. Louis Community College. A national program director for 100 Black Men of America, Freeman has served in a consultant and volunteer for church, community organization, schools, industry and law enforcement agencies.

POLITICS

Shift in issue priorities favors Clinton

Democrats won the 2006 election largely thanks to public disgust with the Iraq war, but polls — and Hillary Clinton's big victory in Ohio — suggest that if the Democrats vote in this year, they have to focus on economic anxiety. Some people reject that idea. They believe that this election should be another referendum on the war and, perhaps even more important, about the way America was misled into that war. That belief is one reason many progressives fervently support Barack Obama, an early opponent of the war, even though his domestic platform is somewhat to the right of Clinton's. As an early opponent of the war myself, I understand their feelings. But "should" and "ought" don't win elections. And polls show that the economy has overtaken Iraq as the public's biggest concern.

True, the news from Iraq probably will turn worse again. Meanwhile, a hefty majority of voters continue to say that the war was a mistake, and people are as angry as ever about the \$10 billion a month wasted on the neocon folly. Yet for the time being, public optimism about Iraq is rising: 55 percent of the public believes that the United States definitely or probably will succeed in achieving its goals. This suggests that anger about the war isn't likely to be decisive in the election. The state of the economy, on the other hand, could well give Democrats a huge advantage — especially to be blunt about it, with white working-class voters who supported President Bush in 2004. Even at its best, the Bush economy left most voters unimpressed: Only once, in January 2007, did a slight majority of those questioned by the USA Today/Gallup poll describe the economy as "excellent" or "good," rather than "only fair" or "poor." A year later, only 19 percent of voters had a good word for its economy.

PAUL KRUGMAN



This collapse in economic confidence occurred even though the full economic effects of the implosion of the housing market and the freezing of the credit markets have yet to be felt. As more things fall apart, perceptions only will get worse. All of this should work to the Democrats' advantage. They can contrast the Clinton boom with the Bush bust; they can make the case that Republican economic ideology, with its fixation on privatization and deregulation, helped get us into this mess. And John McCain can be ridiculed as a man who declared on a number of occasions that he doesn't know much about economics — only to insist later, straight-talker that he is, that he never said any such thing. First, of course, the Democrats have to settle on a nominee. And the shift in electoral focus from Iraq to economic anxiety clearly plays to Clinton's strengths. According to exit polls, Obama narrowly edged out Clinton among Ohio voters who consider Iraq the most important issue — but these voters cast only 19 percent of the ballots in the Democratic primary. Meanwhile, Clinton led by 12 points among the much larger group of voters citing the economy as the most important issue and by 16 points among those who cited health care. Clinton's winning margin was twice as large among those who were worried about their own financial situation as among those who weren't. Why has Obama stumbled when it comes to economic issues? Well, on health care — which is tied closely to overall concerns about financial security — there is a clear, substantive difference between the candidates, with the Clinton plan being significantly stronger. More broadly, I suspect that the Obama mystique — his carefully created image as a transformational, even transcendent figure — has created a backlash among those convinced that he's interested in the anti-establishment work of fighting Ohio voters were more likely to say that Obama inspires them — but more likely to say that Clinton has a clear plan for the country's problems. And Obama's attempt to win over workers by portraying himself as a fierce critic of NAFTA looked — and was — deeply insincere, an appearance particularly costly for a candidate who tries to seem above politics as usual. Thanks to Tuesday's results, the nomination fight will go on to Pennsylvania in April and probably beyond — and rightly so. It's clear now that Clinton, like Obama, has strong grass-roots support that cannot simply be bulldozed aside without alienating voters that the party will badly need in November. So the Democratic National Committee better get moving on plans to do Michigan and Florida over to give the eventual nominee the legitimacy he or she needs. And as the Democrats ponder their choices, they might want to consider which candidate most convincingly can ask: "Are you better off now than you were eight years ago?"

COPYRIGHT THE NEW YORK TIMES