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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Governor’s Utility Bill Receives Heavy Scrutiny in Public Hearing, Ratepayers Demand More

Concerned Maine ratepayers gathered via zoom today, Tuesday, February 22nd, before the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology in a public hearing on L.D. 1959, “An Act To Ensure Transmission And Distribution Utility Accountability,” pushing overwhelmingly that the Committee vote down the bill as written.

Many who testified urged the Committee to pursue utility accountability through real reform that could guarantee it, asserting that L.D. 1959 is not the solution that Mainers need.

Senator Rick Bennett (R-Oxford) testified against the bill, saying, “The real disservice of this bill is the false hope it offers at a time when Mainers need something real. We need to restore honesty and trust in our electric system and in our political system. We will not achieve through dilatory half-measures. Mainers are patient; we are slow to anger. But we have come to realize the game is rigged.”

Emily Rochford, a young climate activist and Unity College student, said, “While accountability for our energy utilities is a desperate need for the state of Maine, the words of Greta Thunberg best describe the practicality of this bill as nothing but ‘blah, blah, blah’ - empty words with no action. As drafted, LD 1959 provides no new mechanisms to address the needs of Maine people. It lacks basic principles of democracy, justice, and accountability which ratepayers and Mainers deserve, and which you are obligated to uphold as our representatives.”

Kay Mann of Hallowell submitted a piece of written comment asserting that: “The entire paradigm of having investor-owned utilities has reached the end of its useful life span. Let's not tinker with a rusty bike...it's ready for the scrap pile.”

Representative Nicole Grohoski (D-Ellsworth) discussed the high cost of electricity driven in part by the high profits guaranteed to CMP and Versant, saying, “I don’t know about you, but I’d like to bring that money back home to the Mainers I serve.”

Referencing Versant Power’s ownership by the City of Calgary, Grohoski continued, “People in Ellsworth and Trenton are charitable, but their generosity does not extend to lowering the tax burden for residents of Calgary. Nor do they believe that the citizens of Calgary care very much about our service quality here in Maine. This bill will not staunch the flow of money out of state,

nor will it guarantee improved service. Until it does these things in a meaningful way, I will not be able to support it.”

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Our Power is a group of Maine ratepayers, business leaders, energy experts, conservationists, and others committed to putting the Pine Tree State’s energy future in the hands of Mainers. Bios of those quoted above are at ourpowermaine.org/about-us.

Our Power published the following statements on February 3, 2022 in response to the release of L.D. 1959:

“Our Power welcomes this new interest in the topics of [our ballot question](#): minimum standards for those who hold the monopoly privilege, and consumer ownership of our most critical energy assets,” said Wayne Jortner, lead petitioner and longtime Senior Counsel for the Public Advocate. “We know all Mainers share our goals: thriving democracy, economic competition, a liveable planet, and safe and affordable energy infrastructure. That is why [our ballot question](#) is built on those principles. Our broad and experienced coalition has worked exclusively toward these goals for over three years, and regrettably, we must oppose the bill presented yesterday because it does not help realize them.”

“First, the PUC’s unelected and unaccountable bureaucrats can already create performance standards and decide if a utility’s failure to meet them warrants any penalty at all.” said State Senator and petitioner Rick Bennett (R-Oxford). “Our Power’s referendum, in contrast, opens the door to energy democracy. While keeping full PUC oversight, it empowers all Maine people with an elected and expert board accountable directly to us, conducting our business openly, here in Maine, and in the light of day. Without such provisions, in my view the Governor’s bill is fatally flawed.”

“Second, the proposal does nothing to reduce Maine’s skyrocketing energy costs. As of a year ago, CMP and Versant’s residential delivery rates – not supply – averaged 9.5 cents per kWh delivered, compared to 6.0 cents for Maine’s consumer-owned utilities,” said State Representative and petitioner Nicole Grohoski (D-Ellsworth). “On top of this, in the past six months alone, CMP was granted a delivery rate increase of 13% and Versant an increase of 17.5%. Maine people work hard for their money, while CMP’s and Versant’s far-off investors sit back in their cushy chairs siphoning off as much as they can get away with. Our Power’s referendum question frees us from this abusive relationship and offers [net savings of \\$9 billion](#) – including the initial purchase cost – with lower bills starting for us all on day one.”

“Third, the bill requires new standards, but the PUC can already set standards under current law. Who in Maine now trusts the PUC to do its job when it has let CMP and Versant fail us, year after year, on every measure?” asked Bill Dunn, petitioner and longtime international utility expert. “The U.S. regulatory system is rigged against us, and CMP and Versant have profited greatly while providing Maine’s captive customers with the most frequent outages in the nation (click ‘Reliable’ tab [here](#)), the worst and fourth-worst customer satisfaction ratings of all large and mid-sized utilities in the nation (click ‘Accountable’ tab [here](#)), and the 11th highest rates in the nation (click ‘Lower Cost’ tab [here](#)).”

“Fourth, while the Governor’s bill is a start, more details are needed to provide a viable path for consumer ownership,” said former Deputy Director of the State Planning Office, Sue Inches. To allow for this transformative change, which would offer democratic governance and capital at half the cost, the legislation needs to establish specific and sufficient timeframes, resources, guidance, and public process.”

“Last but not least, to reach the Governor’s own stated climate goals, consumer ownership is the only proven business model for a just and equitable transition,” noted Emily Rochford, a Unity College student, Maine Youth for Climate Justice leader, and Our Power board member. “It’s no coincidence that all six of the first U.S. communities to arrive at 100% renewables are served by consumer-owned utilities. Both leading large utilities in the race to 100% are also consumer-owned.”

”It is time to re-imagine our grid as a public good, rather than a profit opportunity for investors who don’t share our love of this State and don’t care about our future,” said Our Power board president John Brautigam, attorney and former Efficiency Maine Director. “The people of Maine should—and will—have the chance to decide this question.”