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Illinois Commerce Commission Hosts Customer Service & Technology in the Utility Space Policy Session

CHICAGO – On Tuesday, the Illinois Commerce Commission hosted a policy session addressing customer service and new technology.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss current trends in utility customer engagement including innovative technologies, evolving services, and customer awareness and expectations, and how these factors have contributed to an overhaul of the customer service landscape.

“With significant regulatory and political pressure to implement cleaner energy solutions and grid modernization activities, as well as the pressure of third-party competition, utilities must move in a much more service, customer-oriented direction,” said Chairman Brien Sheahan.

Participants discussed how new technologies can improve customer service and pinpoint how to overcome some of the existing barriers to deploying customer-enabling technologies.

“Utilities, compared to five years ago, are doing a much better job in terms of overall customer satisfaction. Utilities are more engaged with customers than ever,” said Jeff Conklin, Vice President of the Technology, Media, and Telecommunications Practice at J.D. Power.

Some of the services utilities now focus on include managing distributed energy resources, supporting electric vehicles and home area networks, and finding a better way to engage the customer in energy-efficiency, demand-response, and conservation activities by utilizing multiple social media platforms.

“Connectivity plays a large role with smart phones and tablet use continues to grow and enable easier access to utility companies,” Conklin said. “Customers want to be proactively communicated to. The more kinds of services you put in front of a customer, the more satisfied they are.”

Brian Hurst, Director of Business Data Analysis for ComEd said consumers aren’t judging utilities against other utilities in terms of customer satisfaction.

“Utilities are being compared to new technologies such as Uber and Amazon and the experiences they provide,” Hurst said. “Customer expectations are shaped by other industries (like Uber).”

Because of this, Chairman Sheahan added, “regulated utilities most now begin to understand their customers at a much more intimate level, and define and build authentic, trusted customer relationships. Traditional approaches simply did not meet these requirements.”

Other panelists included Mathias Bell, Manager, Regulatory Affairs and Market Development, Opower; Lewis Binswanger, Vice President Regulatory Affairs, AGL Resources; Brian Bowen, Regulatory Affairs Manager, Midwest, FirstFuel; Kevin Brookins, SVP Strategy & Administration, ComEd; Peter Cavan, Regulatory Strategy Manager, EnerNOC; Sameer Doshi, Asst. Attorney General, Public Utilities, Office of the Illinois Attorney General; Dave Kolata, Executive Director, Citizens Utility Board; Joseph Olikier, Sr. Regulatory Counsel, IGS Energy; and Rob Raffaele, Manager, IT Architecture, American Water.

Anastasia Palivos and Elizabeth McErlean, legal and policy advisors for Chairman Sheahan, moderated the discussion groups.

Presentations from the session will be available at a later date on www.icc.illinois.gov.

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About the Illinois Commerce Commission

The Illinois Commerce Commission’s mission is to pursue an appropriate balance between the interests of consumers and existing and emerging service providers to ensure the provision of adequate, efficient, reliable, safe and least-cost public utility services. The Commission pursues this mission through three bureaus: The Bureau of External Affairs, which provides educational information on utility issues for consumers, governmental entities and communities and through its Consumer Services Division, resolves customer/utility disputes and develops rules on utility service and consumer protection; the Public Utilities Bureau, which focuses on financial and operational analysis, policy development, public safety and enforcement activities related to electric, natural gas, water, sewer and telecommunications companies; and the Transportation Bureau, which includes trucking insurance and registration, railroad safety, relocation towing, safety towing and household goods moving company enforcement activities. The ICC’s five commissioners are appointed by the Governor and approved by the Illinois State Senate for five-year terms.