

Md. business coalition to raise energy awareness

Maryland: Business coalition looks to raise awareness about energy crunch

May 29, 2008: 01:44 PM EST

NEW YORK (Associated Press) - Maryland business advocates announced Thursday they are forming a coalition to raise awareness about the energy crunch and its serious implications for consumers.

The coalition, Marylanders for Reliable Power, includes the Maryland Chamber of Commerce, the **Greater Baltimore Committee**, power companies and the Utility Workers Union of America.

"Our goal is very simple: We intend to raise public awareness about the need for reliable power to a level that leads to public policy, which enables that need to be met," said Russell Frisby, a former chairman of the Maryland Public Service Commission who is acting as a coalition spokesman.

Maryland's electricity is supplied by PJM Interconnection, a regional transmission organization that supplies power in 13 states and the District of Columbia, where population growth and rising consumption have stressed the power grid.

The PSC released a report late last year that concluded Maryland could face shortages resulting in rolling brownouts or blackouts by 2011, if nothing is done.

Electricity transmission capacity is congested, and aging infrastructure is a concern.

"This congestion is one of the major causes of this state's higher energy prices and also threatens the reliability of Maryland's electric grid," Frisby said.

The Maryland General Assembly approved several measures proposed by Gov. Martin O'Malley in the last session aimed at conserving more energy, investing in energy efficiency and bolstering Maryland's renewable energy portfolio standards.

While the state's energy concerns were a big topic during the last legislative session, members of the new coalition say they're worried the message hasn't gotten through adequately to the general public and local business communities about how big the problem could be.

Frisby said the coalition will focus on describing the seriousness of the problem to labor organizations and business groups in Maryland's counties to "bring home the message that we can't wait."

"It's been known," Frisby said, "but I would argue that it's been ignored _ that at the street level it's been ignored. The general population, the general business community doesn't understand that we've got a problem and we've got to act now."

Kathleen Snyder, president of the Maryland Chamber of Commerce, said the prospect of rolling blackouts is "terrifying" to the chamber because of the effect they would have on jobs.

"If we don't have reliable power, we're not going to be able to grow or retain jobs in Maryland," Snyder said.

Don Fry, president of the Greater Baltimore Committee, also said more needs to be done to carry the message to Main Street businesses and local communities, where some question the gravity of the problem.

"This is an issue that's going to be requiring a lot of people from the business sector, from the political sector and the general public to realize that it's here and we need to move forward and it's not going to be corrected overnight," Fry said.

Other members of the coalition include Synergics Wind Energy, Allegheny Energy, Choptank Electric Cooperative, Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative and CSX. ■

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