

Oppose SB 84 Don't Undermine the Montana Consumer Counsel

[SB 84 by Sen. Duane Ankney](#) (R-Colstrip) is a bill that would make it more difficult for the Montana Consumer Counsel (MCC) to protect consumers.

The MCC is constitutionally charged with protecting the interests of Montanans before the Montana Public Service Commission in order to ensure that utility customers are not overcharged by monopoly utilities. The PSC's job is to balance the needs of utilities and consumers. The MCC is often the only entity that participates in PSC proceedings in which a utility requests the ability to increase the rates of utility customers. The MCC is a very small office that hires experts and consultants to help review utility requests and argue for consumer protections on a wide range of issues including electricity, gas, solid waste, water supply, and more. Without the MCC expertise and involvement the PSC often does not have the record it needs to legally deny utility requests to raise rates.

SB 84 is problematic for three reasons:

1. It would remove ethical conflicts for legislators overseeing decisions regarding whether MCC can hire experts to review monopoly utility filings and guarantee that consumers are protected from overcharges.
2. It ties the ability of MCC to hire experts and consultants to the Energy and Telecommunications Interim Committee, which does not meet for 9 months before and during legislative sessions, making it difficult for MCC to hire experts on dockets that are occurring in that timeframe.
3. MCC is supposed to be an independent body that is free from political interference. This bill combined with bills to change the balance of interim committees will undermine the political neutrality of the MCC and could result in higher costs for Montana utility customers if MCC is prevented from doing its constitutionally mandated job.