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ICC Chairman Brien Sheahan Discusses Future of the Energy Industry at Penton's Empowering Customers & Cities Conference

Chicago, IL – Chairman Brien Sheahan of the Illinois Commerce Commission today joined industry leaders at Penton's Empowering Customers and Cities Conference, a three-day landmark event developed to change the energy conversation and chart a course for the future of energy usage and delivery.

The purpose of the event was to develop scalable energy solutions and infrastructure that will empower customers and cities in the transforming energy landscape. Focused on addressing critical issues facing the electricity utility industry in the coming decade, the conference highlighted energy customers' demands for more reliable service and sustainable solutions to the delivery of power, as well as the need for regulators to reexamine the traditional utility model construct.

Chairman Sheahan participated in a session on Thursday afternoon entitled "Setting the Policy – Electrifying Tomorrow" to weigh in on whether the role of regulators should be responding to or driving change. Speaking specifically to Illinois policy, Chairman Sheahan emphasized the State should embrace its historical role of energy innovator and national leader by crafting solutions to minimize energy costs to consumers, maximize beneficial deployment of new technologies, reduce environmental externalities, improve the competitive electricity market, and enhance utilities' ability to ensure adequate, efficient, reliable, safe, and least-cost public utility services.

"Evolving consumer interest, more stringent environmental standards, and the steady advance of new technology are driving the transformation we are witnessing," Sheahan said. "And although this transformation is disruptive to the electricity sector, it is revolutionizing how we think about, produce and use power."

Chairman Sheahan noted these new dynamics present significant challenges and opportunities to utilities that will have to seamlessly integrate distributed energy resources, and offer solutions that empower customers to make smarter energy choices while also protecting the interests of low-income customers.

"There is a growing consensus that while the role of utilities has been relatively static since the turn of the 19th Century; their job is going to dramatically change in years to come," Chairman Sheahan said.

Consequently, these dynamics are compelling regulators in Illinois, and throughout the nation, to address some of the most important issues the industry has faced in more than a century.

The Chairman described a stakeholder engagement process being considered by the Illinois Commerce Commission that would focus on developing a shared base of information, facilitating engagement, and addressing the most critical issues facing the industry.

“This initiative is being developed as a non-docketed collaborative process that will conduct research and analyze Illinois’ electric industry with the ultimate goal of reaching consensus on how to meet the evolving needs of customers and the utilities that serve them,” said Chairman Sheahan.

The ICC would begin the process by conducting a policy session to solicit stakeholder ideas about principles to guide the work of the initiative, and then select a facilitator to lead the project. Taking into account stakeholder input, the facilitator would draft a proposal for guiding principles, the specific questions to be addressed by the Initiative, a timetable for the process, and expectations for the content of the final report. The ICC would then review, edit, and approve the facilitator’s recommendations.

Though a timeline for the process was not announced, Chairman Sheahan stressed that there is a real need given the pace of change in the industry. Additionally, he highlighted that the developments in energy technology and services are a great opportunity for Illinois to build upon a restructured market and smart grid energy policies.

“In response to the rapid evolution of both the utility industry and technology, the ICC is already striving to adapt more quickly and to embrace opportunities that come with being technology enablers versus perpetuating antiquated regulations that no longer make sense,” Chairman Sheahan said.

Other speakers during the session included: Fidel Marquez Jr., Senior Vice President, Legislative & External Affairs, Chief Governmental & Community Relations Officer, ComEd; Mark Hura, Global Vice President, Oracle Utilities; and Dr. Martha Symco-Davies, Director of Partnerships for Energy Systems Integration, National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

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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.