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## Residents to see electric costs rise

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**In two years, you can expect your electric bill to “rise dramatically,” according to an expert.**

The Northeast Pennsylvania Manufacturers and Employers Association hosted a roundtable discussion Wednesday morning at the Pottsville Club to discuss the electric restructuring of Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania Utilities Commissioner Tyrone J. Christy told members of the association that current rate caps on the price of electricity are set to expire by 2009 or 2010.

“The situation is serious,” Christy said. “You need to prepare now for higher electric rates.”

By 2010, prices are expected to jump by as much as 50 percent, according to Christy.

Christy said PPL and other Pennsylvania companies have been offering rates frozen at 1996 prices.

Once the rate caps expire, the jump from 1996 prices to 2010 prices will be dramatic, he said.

The bigger problem, according to Christy, is government deregulation of the entire electric industry, allowing companies to compete for business. He said Kentucky and West Virginia have always had government-regulated electric costs, leading to a more stable situation in those states.

A big part of Pennsylvania’s solution might be coal.

“We (Pennsylvania) are the Saudi Arabia of coal,” Christy said. “Alternative energy is great, but we can’t forget about coal. I think there is going to be some (coal) movement out of Harrisburg.”

State Reps. Tim Seip, D-125, and Neal Goodman, D-123, said last week they intend to make a new push for coal, including renewed exports from Pennsylvania to other states as well as renewed use for heat in Pennsylvania homes.

Families and businesses now have two years to make the switch to coal or prepare to write a bigger check to their electric companies each month.

Businesses represented at the meeting said drastically higher costs will impact their operations and probably keep companies from moving into the commonwealth.

“For us, this would be a tremendous impact on our bottom line,” Chris Sweeney, utilities manager for the Dial Corporation, West Hazleton, said after the roundtable. “My concern is something like this might impact the overall cost of manufacturing in the state.”

Martha Herron, PPL spokeswoman, said the company is implementing a “phase-in” method, where customers’ rates would rise slowly over time.

PPL’s rate cap expires in 2009, while most other electric companies have until 2010.

“We’ve proposed programs to phase in the impact on customers. It’s kind of like a Christmas club,” Herron said. “It’s about educating the consumer about what they can do to save energy.”

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