



MEDIA RELEASE

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Proposed Bill Would Help Powerful Utilities Trample on the Little Guy

ATLANTA – Georgia Watch and the Georgia Alliance for Ethics Reform are urging lawmakers to oppose Senate Bill 160, which would allow regulated utilities to make direct campaign contributions to political candidates, except those running for Public Service Commission.

The proposed bill, which passed out of legislative committee today and is headed quickly for a floor vote, would allow Georgia Power, Atlanta Gas Light, and other utilities to wield even greater influence over policymakers.

“For more than 35 years, Georgians have recognized the inherent conflict in allowing state-regulated monopolies to donate to political campaigns,” said Georgia Watch Deputy Director Danny Orrock. “SB 160 would transfer even greater power to these companies that already wield an enormous amount of influence across the state.”

Sponsors of the bill cite a recent U.S Supreme Court ruling that says corporate political giving is protected speech.

But Orrock says regulated utility companies are fundamentally different than private corporations.

“Regulated utilities serve customers who are held captive based simply on where they live or locate their business,” said Orrock. “The bill would substantially increase utility giving. Individual speech would get trampled on by the financial and political resources of the big utility companies.”

Utility companies already have tremendous clout at the Public Service Commission (PSC), where four out of five commissioners almost always vote in their favor.

If the PSC proves unreceptive to a specific proposal, utility companies will appeal directly to state legislators.

This is exactly what happened in 2009, when Georgia Power sent more than 70 lobbyists to the Gold Dome to push for SB 31, a bill that allowed the electric company to charge customers more than a billion dollars in early profit for the construction of two new nuclear plants near Augusta. Even though the plants won't be operational until at least 2017, the bill was swiftly signed into law.

This is exactly what happened in 2009, when Snellville Senator Dan Balfour sponsored SB 31, a bill that allowed Georgia Power to charge customers more than a billion dollars in early profit for the construction of nuclear plants that won't be operational until at least 2017. Before the bill was signed into law, Georgia Power sent more than 70 lobbyists to the Gold Dome to help Senator Balfour persuade his colleagues.

As the primary sponsor of SB 160, Senator Balfour once again is behind legislation that disregards basic consumer protections and bypassed the state's well-established system of checks and balances.

Founded in 2002, Georgia Watch is a nonprofit, nonpartisan 501-(c)(3) watchdog group focusing on consumer education and research in the areas of health care, insurance, identity theft, consumer energy issues and personal finance. For more information, call Georgia Watch at 404-525-1085, or visit us at www.georgiawatch.org.