



KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

LEGEND RETURNS

DETROIT TIGERS LEGEND JUSTIN VERLANDER IS RETURNING TO THE TEAM AFTER SIGNING A ONE-YEAR DEAL WORTH \$13 MILLION. THE FUTURE HALL OF FAME LAST PITCHED FOR DETROIT IN 2017. C1

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UTILITY REGULATION

Little-known fact: We pay utilities to argue for higher rates



Crews with DTE Energy work on the scene of a winter power outage in Ann Arbor on Jan. 13, 2024. Advocates are taking aim at the costs involved in utilities arguing for rate increases before the Michigan Public Service Commission. *MLive.com files*

Some advocates, including Michigan's attorney general, say utility customers shouldn't be on the hook for attorney and consultant fees.

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LANSING — When utility rates go up, customers' wallets make it possible.

In Michigan and many other states, for-profit utility companies spend millions of dollars on teams of lawyers and highly paid consultants who argue for higher rates.

Their customers routinely pick up the tab while paying to keep the lights on and the gas flowing, but few realize they're doing that.

"Consider me a pretty informed consumer and that just blows my mind," said Matthew Tosiello, a Royal Oak resident and customer of the state's largest power provider, DTE Energy.

"The fact that 100% of the cost is going to ratepayers and none is going to corporate, especially if we're talking over a million dollars, that's outrageous."

As rate hike requests balloon in size and increase in frequency, some advocates are now questioning the practice of utilities charging customers to negotiate higher rates before the regulatory Michigan Public Service Commission.

WHAT TO DO

A handful of other states have passed laws to ban or restrict it.

"The fact that they're passing along the costs of arguing to raise our rates as much as possible onto the people that are paying the rates is a problem," said Nick Dodge, communications director for the Michigan League of Conservation Voters, an advocacy group critical of the state's dominant utilities.

"If more utility customers knew about that, I think they'd be pretty upset, because people are already struggling to pay their energy costs," he said.

Michigan's attorney general has even taken up the banner.

Dana Nessel's office is now seeking to block more than \$7 million of DTE's pending \$574 million electric rate hike request from appearing on utility bills, arguing the costs have skyrocketed and customers shouldn't pay them all.

Michigan's biggest utilities downplay the expenses, saying they make up a tiny fraction of the hundreds of millions of dollars at issue in "rate cases," the 10-month legal proceedings they must go through to justify higher rates.

Besides, they say, those cases are necessary to safely and reliably serve customers.

"As a regulated utility, DTE Energy relies on the Michigan Public Service Commission to review and approve the transformational investments we are making on behalf of our customers," said DTE spokesperson Ryan Lowry. "We make these requests through formal rate case proceedings, and our investments are showing results."

TARGETING COSTS

It's difficult to know exactly how much power and gas customers are paying for utilities to prepare and complete rate hike requests, but they appear to be on the rise.

DTE and other utilities rarely track or disclose exact costs, instead lumping the expenses with general operational spending passed to customers.

An expert witness for Nessel's office determined DTE's pending request to increase the average residential electric bill by 11%, the second-largest in decades, could ultimately cost \$14.3 million.

The figure is derived from what DTE has revealed it spends on external consultants who support its rate hike requests.

Those costs have jumped from roughly \$170,000 in 2022 to an estimated \$1.3 million in DTE's current electric case, opened in 2025, according to the attorney general's filings. For the five consultants employed in the open DTE case, that works out to \$3,085 per page of testimony they filed, according to the filings.

Since DTE can count on recovering all the costs from customers, there's nothing to keep the spending in check, the attorney general's office argues.

"It also creates a perverse universe where DTE's customers are paying for the mechanism by which DTE is annually attempting larger and larger rate increases," Nessel's office wrote in a legal brief.

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GORDIE HOWE BRIDGE

Michigan leaders clash along party lines after Trump's threat

Republicans defend the president's economic aims while others voice support for the new span to Canada.

Jackie Smith *jsmith@mlive.com*

DETROIT — Widespread pushback — and some support — have rolled in days after President Donald Trump first threatened to stymie opening the Gordie Howe International Bridge with a list of economic complaints about Canada.

In a post on his platform Truth Social Monday, Trump suggested he might block the new span, claiming the U.S. should own "at least half" of the bridge. He also demanded the country's northern neighbor agree to trade deals more beneficial to the U.S., calling out Canada's negotiating a deal with China.

Since the post, leaders on both sides of the border have sought to clarify details about the Gordie Howe Bridge, particularly the ownership stake the U.S. already has and how the cost of the multibillion-dollar project has been covered.

SEE GORDIE HOWE BRIDGE, A7

TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY

Judge dismisses attempt to get state voter data

The Department of Justice lawsuit was dismissed by a Trump-nominated judge.

Isabella Volmert *Associated Press*

LANSING — A federal judge has dismissed a lawsuit from the Department of Justice that sought to obtain Michigan's voter rolls, marking the latest judicial rejection in President Donald Trump's wide-ranging attempts to gain access to voter data from states.

The Justice Department has sued at least 23 states and the District of Columbia in its effort to obtain detailed voter information. In an opinion issued Tuesday, U.S. District Judge Hala Y. Jarbou, a Trump nominee, said the laws cited by the Justice Department in its complaint, including the Civil Rights Act of 1960, do not require the disclosure of the records it sought.

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