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In My Opinion: Communal energy conservation urged

By CURT GERVICH

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As a professor of environmental policy and sustainability, I think it's wonderful that energy is receiving significant space in Plattsburgh's public dialogue.

Indeed, creating awareness about the importance of energy planning is the first step in creating a more secure energy future in the Lake City.

I've spent the past year exploring rural New York's energy landscape and hope I can further clarify the objectives, myths and complexities of Plattsburgh's energy system.

Plattsburgh's electric rates, and those of 50 other communities in New York, are among the least expensive in the country.

The city's typical residential rate is approximately 2 cents per kilowatt hour (kwh). The national average is around 12 cents per kwh, and New York state's average is about 18 cents per kwh.

Plattsburgh's low rates stem from federal and state policies — called preference power policies— written in the 1950s to enable the construction of hydroelectric dams on the Niagara River.

The Niagara policy allocates 40 percent of the power generated at Niagara dams to rural communities in New York at the cost of production.

To receive preference power, communities must operate municipally owned electric utilities, like Plattsburgh Municipal Lighting Department. Each participating community receives a specified allowance of power at the inexpensive rates.

Plattsburgh receives approximately 103 megawatts. If at any point, the city consumes more than 103 mw of power, we must purchase supplemental power on the "day-ahead" market.

The cost of supplemental power is indicated on your electric bill by the Purchase Power Adjustment Charge. Plattsburgh is lucky because we purchase supplemental power only during the coldest months of winter — thus the rate increases that Mayor Calnon and MLD Manager Bill Treacy warn of are temporary.

Plattsburgh has received preference power since the Niagara program's inception. Because the policy is codified at the state and federal levels, it is unlikely to be rescinded.

Additionally, given the program's economic benefits and local support for MLD, our lighting department is unlikely to be decommissioned.

Plattsburgh is very likely to remain a participant in the program for the foreseeable future.

The Press-Republican editorial makes several points about the challenges that preference power policies pose for conservation. The editorial suggests that our inexpensive rates remove the price incentives that often motivate people to invest in energy efficiency.

While the editorial is correct by suggesting that returns on energy investments are protracted, it doesn't mean that cost savings are eliminated. Prolonged returns on investments are equivalent to immediate benefits; they just require patience.

Another unique component of Plattsburgh's preference power policy is that it gives us the chance to think about power consumption in a communal context.

Plattsburgh's purchases of supplemental power result from residents' collective consumption patterns. Therefore, if Plattsburghians act together to reduce power consumption, we could eliminate the need to purchase supplemental power altogether.

Reducing our collective consumption patterns below 103 mw also means that we create a surplus of inexpensive power that we can use to nurture economic-development opportunities.

MLD participates in the Independent Energy Efficiency Program, which assists our community in making energy-efficiency investments. A tiny percentage of our electric bills are funneled into Plattsburgh's savings account at the IEEP. The IEEP charge on your bill represents your contribution.

The city can use these funds to assist residents in weatherizing their homes and making other improvements.

MLD can also assist businesses, such as by helping grocery stores enclose the large open freezers in their meat departments.

Finally, Plattsburgh can use these funds for major municipal projects, such as generating our own power through solar or wind installations or making other improvements to our energy infrastructure.

I hope I've clarified some points about our electric rates and provided a rationale for continued investment in energy security.

Please visit my website, curtgervich.com, for further information regarding Plattsburgh's energy system and energy policy in rural New York.

Kudos to Mayor Calnon, Mr. Treacy and the Press-Republican for making energy part of our community conversation.

Curt Gervich is an assistant professor of environmental policy and sustainability at SUNY Plattsburgh. In 2012-13, he interviewed mayors and utility superintendents of the 51 municipalities that receive New York's preference power. His findings have been submitted to the Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences.