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EDITORIALS

Protect energy customers

Most consumers don't even know they can choose which company supplies their electricity and natural gas. To encourage competition (and keep prices down), the state took away the utilities' monopoly several years ago, but for one reason or another it's been a fairly well-kept secret. Now, thankfully, the Public Service Commission has directed the major utilities to advertise the option.

Under the new rules, Niagara Mohawk, New York State Electric & Gas (or whichever local utility) still delivers the juice or gas, but the customer may ask a different company (such as Agway, Energetix or Econnergy) to supply it to the utility. For most customers, the alternative companies charge a dollar or two less per month than the big boys, but prices might fall even more if the competition heated up. That was the principle behind deregulation, and it's a good one.

Now that the utilities are finally being forced to do a better job spreading the word

about consumer choice, the system might work a little more as it was intended.

In the meantime, the governor should sign a bill — the Energy Consumer Protection Act — passed by the Legislature that would establish the same protections for consumers who switch suppliers as now exist for traditional utility customers.

For example, the alternative suppliers should be required to offer budget plans or allowances for delinquencies due to a personal crisis; they shouldn't be allowed to require a deposit or prepayment for service; or to charge exorbitant late fees; and their customers should be allowed to take billing disputes or complaints to the Public Service Commission.

If the governor really wants a truly competitive energy business, he has to level the playing field in this fashion. Simply informing consumers about their new choice isn't enough.