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Guest column: PSC works to keep rates low, energy flowing

By Tim Echols

Guest columnist

@gtimes

POSTED: December 3, 2016 12:30 a.m.



Public Service Commissioner Tim Echols
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As a Public Service Commissioner, I have spent the last six years meeting constituents, listening to concerns and discussing energy issues, speaking to civic clubs, advancing technology—things you would expect from an elected regulator.

You can be proud Georgia leads the nation in many ways, and the future is bright, despite extensive federal regulations and occasional criticism from left-leaning critics.

Those critics have been loud and proud against nuclear energy and utility water usage, whether it's Plant Vogtle's reactors under construction or potential nuclear plants. Here is what they don't address.

If federal regulations continue to result in closure of coal plants that operate around the clock regardless of weather, how do we provide the reliability businesses and ratepayers expect? We continue to add intermittent energy sources like wind, solar and natural gas backup generators, but only God controls the weather. Carbon-free nuclear energy is the answer.

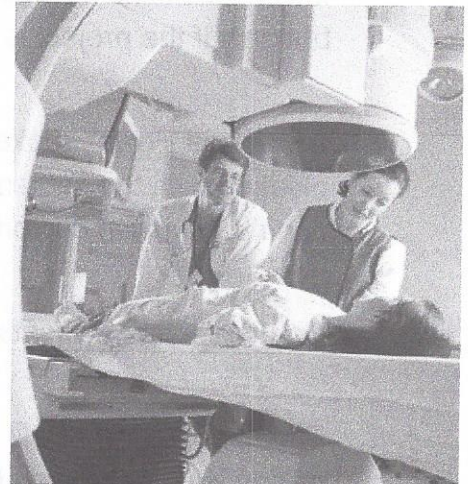
As Georgia grows, we expect to add 3 million new residents by 2030, our need for power generation and water grows. Some forms of power generation require water for cooling. Balancing the need for

more power sources with demand for water is a challenge we hope to address through renewables, demand-side management and innovative research. For example, a research center near Cartersville is evaluating innovative technologies to reduce water at plant sites. That's why the comprehensive study we approved in July for a potential nuclear-powered generating site south of Columbus along the Chattahoochee River will, among many things, take a closer look at those water questions.

Here is the good news: Since 2003, Georgia Power has reduced withdrawals from waterways by almost 80 percent statewide, 2,100 million gallons per day. In the Chattahoochee, the reduction has been 91 percent.

Speaking of reductions, the PSC cut rates by \$4.60 for Georgia Power customers starting June 1. When you add that to \$5 cut last December, ratepayers enjoy almost \$10 less per month in electricity. The icing on the cake is the merger deal between the Southern Company and Atlanta

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Gas Light Resources, resulting in an agreement by Georgia Power to freeze base rates for three years. Electric rates now are about 14 percent below the national average, not bad considering we don't drill for gas or oil, and have no coal or uranium mines.

No doubt you have heard about Georgia's advancement in renewable energy. The PSC's forward-thinking action in adding solar to our grid resulted in more Georgia clean energy jobs in the first quarter of 2015 than anywhere in the nation. Expect to see more of this, especially in middle and south Georgia where land is cheap and flat.

As Georgia's economy expands and energy needs increase, we must preserve options for future facilities to meet that demand. That is what the PSC exists to do. Water availability and its usage will be a central part of the evaluation for any new plant in this state. We owe that to the state and to our limited waterways.

The PSC is working every day to keep energy affordable and reliable. Having commissioners who are proven and trusted makes the agency work for you. It is my goal to ensure "public service" stays a part of the commission.

I welcome questions and comments at techols@psc.state.ga.us, on Facebook, Twitter (@timechols), Instagram, Linked-In and Snapchat; or text me at 706-340-0773. I look forward to serving another six years for all Georgians.

Georgia Public Service Commissioner Tim Echols is a resident of Jackson County.

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