

Sigeco workers try lobbying

By Dan Bernard

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INDIANAPOLIS — The stakes were high enough on Senate Bill 637 that Southern Indiana Gas & Electric Co. tried something new: Putting its employees to work lobbying state lawmakers over the telephone.

As the bill proposing limited deregulation for utilities worked its way through the General Assembly this session, Sigeco's political action committee used its in-house newsletter to keep the utility's employees posted.

When the time came for the House of Representatives to consider amendments that could hinder or weaken the bill, Sigeco's PAC notified its members and activated a "phone tree."

PAC members telephoned their state representatives and urged them

to defeat any proposed changes, then called other employees — some who are PAC members, some who are not — and told them to pass the message along, too. Some Sigeco employees called their legislators from work, said Gregg McManus, the utility's director of governmental relations.

"We say, 'Here's the bill, this is where it's at, we'd like for you to call,'" McManus said.

SB 637 is a partial deregulation measure that would let power companies stop refunding excess profits and request exemptions from the state's regulatory authority.

Rep. J. Jeff Hays, D-Evansville, who opposes the bill, got one of the phone calls yesterday morning. Suspicious because the caller understood

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technicalities of the legislative process, Hays asked what he did for a living and was told the caller worked for Sigeco.

The phone tree is not a new concept for interest groups, but McManus said this is the first time Sigeco has used the technique to influence legislation.

"We really haven't had anything this important to work on before," McManus said.

The lobbying strategy had dubious success in Sigeco's own back yard. All state representatives from Evansville supported amendments to water down SB 637 during House votes yesterday. Rep. Sally Rideout Lambert, R-Boonville, opposed some of the amendments but said she had not been swayed by Sigeco representatives.

McManus said employees were encouraged but not ordered to call representatives and weren't checked up on.

He noted that an opponent of the bill, the Citizens Action Coalition, has also orchestrated mass phone calls, often recruiting elderly Hoosiers who are worried their power bills would increase.

"The CAC is having old people call. At least our people know the facts," McManus said.

A lobbyist for Alcoa, which opposes the bill, said he saw nothing wrong with Sigeco asking employees to call legislators. Alcoa does the same thing, said the representative, Gary Biviano.

But Biviano did question Sigeco's decision to organize the phone campaign through its PAC. Political action committees determine which political candidates will receive campaign contributions from a corporation or group.

"I do not link issues during the session with our political action committee," said Biviano, who serves as treasurer for Alcoa's PAC. "I won't use PAC letterhead, because I think that intimates that support on the issue will necessarily result in a contribution, or threatens that they will not get a contribution based on a vote."

The Sigeco employee PAC has between 150 and 175 members, but many non-PAC members joined in the phone campaign, McManus said.

There is no regulation that restricts political activities by employees of public utilities in Indiana, said Cheryl Bickel, spokeswoman for the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission.