Agenda Date: 6/15/11 Agenda Item: 2F



STATE OF NEW JERSEY

Board of Public Utilities Two Gateway Center, Suite 801 Newark, NJ 07102 www.nj.gov/bpu/

IN THE MATTER OF THE BOARD'S REVIEW)	<u>ENERGY</u>
OF THE RETAIL MARGIN AND THE)	
COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL ENERGY)	DECISION AND ORDER
PRICING ("CIEP") THRESHOLD - PETITION)	
FOR RECONSIDERATION)	DOCKET NO. EO10050338

Murray Bevin, Esq. (Bevan, Mosca, Giuditta & Zarillo, P.C.), Basking Ridge, NJ, on behalf of the Retail Energy Supply Association, Petitioner

Margaret Comes, Esq., Senior Attorney, Rockland Electric Company, New York, NY, on behalf of the electric distribution companies, Respondents

Ami Morita, Esq., Deputy Rate Counsel, Division of Rate Counsel, (Stefanie A. Brand, Director)

BY THE BOARD:

By this Order, the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities ("Board") considers a letter brief filed as a "petition" by the Retail Energy Supply Association ("RESA"), 1 asking the Board to reconsider its Order issued in Docket No. EO10050338 on November 22, 2010 (the "Retail Margin Order"). RESA contends that the decision to eliminate the Retail Margin was based on material errors of fact and law because, according to RESA, the decision to eliminate the retail margin was based exclusively "on unreasonable inferences from non-descript customer switching statistics and unsupported assertions by commenters." RESA letter brief at 1. As explained below, the Board denies RESA's request for reconsideration because the Retail Margin Order was supported by the evidence, and RESA has failed to establish sufficient grounds for reconsideration.

BACKGROUND

As part of its yearly review of the basic generation service ("BGS") procurement process, in its Order in Docket Nos. EX01110754 and EO02070384 dated December 18, 2002, the Board approved the imposition of an additional charge on certain larger customers which has come to be known as the "Retail Margin." The charge was intended to provide an incentive for customers to shop for their electricity supply from third party suppliers ("TPS"), and also to

² The Board's discretionary authority to assess the Retail Margin was subsequently codified in <u>N.J.S.A.</u> 48:3-57 with the definition of Retail Margin in <u>N.J.S.A.</u> 48:3-51.

¹ RESA's members include ConEdison Solutions; Constellation NewEnergy, Inc.; Direct Energy Services, LLC; Energy Plus Holdings, LLC; Exelon Energy Company; GDF SUEZ Energy Resources NA, Inc.; Green Mountain Energy Company; Hess Corporation; Integrys Energy Services, Inc.; Just Energy; Liberty Power; NextEra Energy Services; Noble Americas Energy Solutions LLC; PPL EnergyPlus; Reliant Energy Northeast LLC.

reflect within the price for BGS those additional costs of providing electric service at retail, as opposed to the costs of providing default service. The Board imposed a Retail Margin of 5 mils/kWh on larger customers with a peak load equal to 750 kW or more, in the belief that these customers should be encouraged to shop for retail electric supplies, and that this group of larger customers would be more attractive to licensed suppliers. Specifically, the Board approved a charge of 5 mils/kWh for non-residential BGS-Fixed Price ("FP") customers with a peak load of 750 kWh or greater, and for all BGS-Commercial and Industrial Energy Pricing ("CIEP") customers as a means for encouraging the development of retail competition.

In the 2010 BGS proceeding in Docket No. EO09050351, the Board sought information to help it determine whether the Retail Margin is still serving its intended purpose, and therefore requested comments from the electric distribution companies ("EDCs")³ and interested stakeholders on the potential reduction, phase-out, or elimination of the Retail Margin. Accordingly, the Board directed that a Secretary's Letter be issued requesting comment on the potential adjustment to the Retail Margin. The Secretary's Letter was issued on November 12, 2009, with comments due by November 20, 2009, which were received in a timely manner from the EDCs, RESA, the New Jersey Business and Industry Association ("NJBIA"), the National Energy Marketers Association ("NEMA"), Constellation Energy Commodities Group, Inc. and Constellation NewEnergy, Inc. (collectively, "Constellation"), PPL EnergyPlus LLC, and the New Jersey Department of the Public Advocate, Division of Rate Counsel ("Rate Counsel").

The comments received on the potential reduction, phase-out or elimination of the Retail Margin generated a significant response from stakeholders. In addition to addressing the merits of the Retail Margin itself, some of the comments were directed at the abbreviated timeframe of the comment period and for the subsequent Board decision. After reviewing the comments received from stakeholders, the Board agreed that the complexity of the issues involved in this matter did merit a greater amount of time and consideration than the schedule would have allowed. Accordingly, in the 2010 BGS Order dated December 10, 2009, the Board directed that no change be made in the Retail Margin for the period beginning June 1, 2010. However, the Board directed Staff to initiate a proceeding regarding the Retail Margin upon conclusion of the 2010 BGS Auction which would allow all stakeholders and interested parties to submit written comments, and to present oral testimony at a legislative type hearing.

On June 28, 2010, the Board issued an Order initiating the review of the Retail Margin, asking parties to comment on whether the Retail Margin the Board imposed on larger customers with a peak load above 750 kW is still serving its intended purpose. Initial comments were due on July 9, 2010, and final comments were due on September 3, 2010. A public hearing was held on August 20, 2010 in Trenton, which was chaired by Board President Lee Solomon. Comments were received in a timely manner from the EDCs, RESA, NJBIA, NEMA, Constellation, and Rate Counsel. On October 5, 2010, at its regularly scheduled Agenda Hearing, the Board unanimously agreed to eliminate the Retail Margin effective June 1, 2011. On December 9, 2010, RESA filed with the Board a letter seeking the reconsideration of the Retail Margin Order and other relief. RESA maintains that the Board's decision "was based exclusively on unreasonable inferences from non-descript customer switching statistics and unsupported assertions by commenters." RESA letter brief at 1. RESA requests that the elimination of the Retail Margin be stayed, that a formal evidentiary hearing be opened, and that a scheduling conference for this reopened proceeding be held, including the right to discovery from the EDCs.

³ Jersey Central Power & Light Company, Atlantic City Electric Company, Rockland Electric Co. and Public Service Electric & Gas Company.

Now designated as the Division of Rate Counsel.

⁵ A written Board Order was issued on November 22, 2010.

On December 28, 2010, the EDCs filed their opposition to the RESA's request for reconsideration. According to the EDCs, RESA fails to support its arguments because it does not provide examples where the switching statistics cited by the Board were incorrect nor does it identify any unsupported assertions. Also, the EDCs contend that the Board did not rely exclusively on switching statistics for its decision, nor does the Electric Discount and Energy Competition Act ("EDECA") require the Board to continue the Retail Margin. On December 29, 2010, Rate Counsel filed a letter opposing reconsideration and standing by the comments previously filed which supported the elimination of the Retail Margin. On January 5, 2011, RESA filed a reply to the EDCs' opposition filing, asserting that it had indeed provided sufficient information to support its request for reconsideration.

Under N.J.A.C. 14:1-8.7,⁶ the Board must grant or otherwise expressly act upon a motion for reconsideration or rehearing within 60 days of its filing, or it will be deemed denied. Due to the additional time needed to review and respond to the motion⁷, on January 19, 2011, the Board approved the issuance of a Secretary's letter to the parties, informing them that the Board was continuing its review, and would act on it beyond the 60-day time limit.

RESA'S REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION

RESA asserts that reconsideration of the Retail Margin Order is warranted because the decision is based on material errors of fact and law. Consequently, RESA requests that the Board stay the elimination of the Retail Margin pending a final determination by the Board on whether it should be reduced, expanded or maintained; reopen the legislative-type hearing held in the matter as a formal evidentiary hearing; set a procedural schedule for parties and interested stakeholders to demand discovery from the EDCs; and convene a scheduling conference. RESA's letter brief at 1-2.

RESA argues that the decision to eliminate the Retail Margin was based exclusively on "unreasonable inferences from non-descript customer switching statistics and unsupported assertions by commenters." RESA letter brief at 1. The Board, according to RESA, determined that the current increased levels of customer switching, when compared to historic switching, show that the Retail Margin is no longer benefiting ratepayers by encouraging competition and was instead operating as a tax or penalty. RESA claims that the switching statistics relied on by the Board show that it is in fact more likely than not that the Retail Margin is still serving its intended purpose. RESA contends that the Board failed to analyze or discuss the high level of non-switching of customers who have not been subject to the Retail Margin, specifically residential and commercial customers below the 750 kW peak demand threshold. RESA's letter brief at 3-4.

RESA reiterates its argument that the Retail Margin is necessary "to level the playing field" of TPS and BGS supply costs, and that the Board almost exclusively relied on whether the Retail Margin was encouraging customers to shop for retail suppliers. Such a focus, according to RESA, failed to address the Retail Margin's purpose to "act as a proxy" for increased costs for TPSs relative to BGS, and as a proxy for fully unbundling all generation service related costs from distribution rates RESA's letter brief at 4-5.

⁶ N.J.A.C. 14:1-8.7 (c) provides with respect to motions for reconsideration that "[a]ny motion hereunder which is not granted or otherwise expressly acted upon by the Board within 60 days after the filing thereof, shall be deemed denied." The 60-day period for action required by the Board under the rule would have expired on February 7, 2011, prior to the next regularly scheduled Board meeting of February 10, 2011.

According to RESA, programs currently offered by the EDCs do not adequately address these differences in costs since the EDCs do not have a true "purchase of receivables" program for electricity commodity supply. There is instead a "dual billing" and "utility consolidated billing" method available to customers. Under utility consolidated billing, TPSs receive payment for their electric commodity service from the EDC. However, under "utility consolidated billing" if a customer fails to pay the EDC for 60 days, according to RESA, the EDC drops the customer to dual billing. RESA believes that the reversion to the dual billing format without concomitant disconnect authority places TPSs at a significant competitive disadvantage compared to BGS service, and creates undue customer confusion, especially for residential and small commercial customers. RESA letter brief at 5-6.

In New Jersey, RESA notes, TPSs cannot terminate electricity service to customers for non-payment, giving the EDCs an uncollectible accounts expense advantage over TPSs. A purchase of receivables program can correct this imbalance, according to RESA, but the current billing platform in New Jersey falls short because of the "revert to dual billing" mechanism. Ibid.

RESA also contends that the Board relied on RESA's failure to participate in the EDC's annual base rate cases to establish its position that the Retail Margin still accounts for BGS favored costs. RESA agrees that it has failed to raise issues regarding the Retail Margin in EDC distribution base rate cases, and requests that the Board stay its Retail Margin Order until RESA has the opportunity to discuss Retail Margin, base rate unbundling, and other related issues in the EDCs' base rate cases.

RESA also contends the Board failed to consider other methods for accomplishing the Retail Margin's necessary function. RESA recommends that the Board adopt a nonrecourse purchase of receivables program, fully unbundle all generation service related costs, and require the EDCs to provide retail choice information to BGS customers. <u>Id</u>. at 6.

In its reply dated January 5, 2011, RESA maintained that the EDCs' had failed to rebut RESA's position that the Board based its decision to eliminate the Retail Margin on the same evidence that it had reviewed in previous years and found insufficient to support a change in the Retail Margin, as well as "a flawed interpretation of switching statistics." RESA reply at 1. According to RESA, the Board failed to address the switching statistics of customers who are not subject to the Retail Margin as evidence of the need for the charge, and the EDCs failed to provide information on cost disparity that the Board must consider before eliminating the Retail Margin. Id at 2.

EDCS' COMMENTS

The EDCs contend that RESA has failed to provide any new facts or legal basis which would justify the Board reversing its decision. The EDCs note that a decision of the Board is valid if there is reasonable support in the record. <u>I/M/O Public Service Electric and Gas Company</u>, 167 N.J. 377, 393 (2001), and assert that there is sufficient support here. EDCs Comments at 7.

The EDCs explain that the Board requested information to determine whether the Retail Margin is still serving its intended purpose, received initial and final comments and held a legislative hearing to receive additional comments. In making its decision, the Board reviewed the comments provided by the parties, including the switching statistics and information on the number of TPSs serving New Jersey customers along with the information provided by RESA and others concerning the administrative expenses that the TPSs face in the market. The Board noted that BGS prices include procurement costs of the winning bidders for their own procurement activities. The Board agreed that TPSs have some inherent marketing

advantages over BGS, and that, although certain costs may be incurred among TPSs that are not incurred by the EDCs, those costs may be offset by the TPSs' marketing advantages. EDCs' Comments at 4-5.

RESA mistakenly argues, according to the EDCs, that the Board should have conducted evidentiary hearings and that the Board's decision was not sufficiently supported by the evidence. RESA relies on In re Application of Howard Savings Institution of Newark, 32 N.J. 29 (1960) ("Howard Savings"), where the Commissioner of Banking and Insurance approved the application of a mutual savings bank to establish a branch office in a municipality located in the same county as the main office. However, Howard Savings does not provide RESA with the support it seeks as the Supreme Court of New Jersey held that the administrative decision was adequate, and affirmed the decision of the Commissioner of Banking and Insurance because "we and the interested parties can and do understand fully the meaning of the decision and the reasons for it...." Id. at 53. The Retail Margin Order eliminated the Retail Margin, and the Board fully explained its rationale, as did the Commissioner of Banking in Howard Savings. Therefore, according to the EDCs, RESA's reliance on Howard Savings is misplaced. EDCs' Comments at 6-7.

According to the EDCs, the Board correctly determined that the Retail Margin was a tool intended to stimulate the retail market. Reviewing seven years' worth of experience, the Board concluded that the Retail Margin had served its purpose. The EDCs note that the Board recognized that there are some customers who simply choose not to switch or are unable to switch. Customers who have not switched to date are unlikely to do so in large numbers. Maintaining the Retail Margin when customers demonstrate an unwillingness or inability to switch year after year simply serves to penalize these customers. If after seven years they have made a conscious decision not to switch, they should not be penalized for that decision. EDCs' Comments at 7.

RESA incorrectly argues that the purpose of the Retail Margin is to "equalize" the playing field among TPSs and BGS providers, according to the EDCs. The EDCs note that the Board correctly concluded in the Retail Margin Order that the purpose of the Retail Margin was to promote a competitive market. The Retail Margin was not intended to cover every cost of operating a TPS or add costs for those who choose not to shop for their electric supply. The EDCs also note that the Board recognized that, while there may be some costs for some TPSs that are not shared by the EDCs, these costs are offset by the TPSs' marketing advantages, which the EDCs do not have under the BGS procurement process. EDCs' Comments at 7-8.

Moreover, the EDCs explain, RESA has not established any grounds for reconsideration of the Retail Margin Order. RESA asserts in conclusory fashion that the Retail Margin Order is based on material errors of fact and law but fails to support this conclusory assertion, as it does not provide examples where the switching statistics cited by the Board were incorrect nor does it identify any unsupported assertions. That data demonstrates a robust TPS market where over 5,600 MW of load in New Jersey is being served by TPSs, an amount in aggregate larger than the load served by many utilities in the United States, and where, in PSE&G's territory alone, customers have approximately 30 TPSs to choose from. EDCs Comments at 7-8.

Also, as established above, the Board did not rely exclusively on switching statistics for its decision, nor does EDECA require the Board to continue the Retail Margin. The request for reconsideration, according to the EDCs, merely reiterates the arguments in RESA's prior submissions – arguments that the Board already has considered and rejected. When a petition for reconsideration appears merely to reiterate the facts and arguments contained in a petitioner's submissions already considered by the Board, the Board may deny the petition. In Re Bell Atlantic-New Jersey, Inc., Docket No. TO00060356 (September 22, 2004). RESA's

arguments, according to the EDCs, have already been considered by the Board, and therefore, the Board should deny the request for reconsideration. EDCs Comments at 7-8.

DISCUSSION AND FINDING

Following extensive review, the Board <u>FINDS</u> that nothing in RESA's request requires the Board to modify or otherwise reconsider its decision. Generally, a party should not seek reconsideration merely based upon dissatisfaction with a decision. <u>D'Atria v. D'Atria</u>, 242 <u>N.J. Super.</u> 392, 401 (Ch. Div. 1990). Rather, reconsideration is reserved for those cases where (1) the decision is based upon a "palpably incorrect or irrational basis;" or (2) it is obvious that the finder of fact did not consider, or failed to appreciate, the significance of probative, competent evidence. <u>E.g.</u>, <u>Cummings v. Bahr</u>, 295 <u>N.J. Super.</u> 374, 384 (App. Div. 1996). The moving party must show that the action was arbitrary, capricious or unreasonable. <u>D'Atria</u>, <u>supra</u>, 242 <u>N.J. Super.</u> at 401

N.J.A.C. 14:1-8.6 requires that a request for rehearing or reconsideration be done by a motion that enumerates the alleged errors of law or fact, and where an opportunity is sought to introduce additional evidence, that evidence shall be stated briefly with the reasons for failing to provide it previously. RESA did not file a motion or otherwise conform to the requirements of the regulation. However, the Board has the power to relax its administrative regulations if doing so permits the Board to effectively carry out its statutory functions. N.J.A.C. 14:1-1.2.

But this Board will not modify an Order in the absence of a showing that the Board's action constituted an injustice or that the Board misunderstood or failed to take note of a significant element of fact or law. Here, the Board does not find that the issues raised by RESA are sufficient to warrant reconsideration or modification.

Absent a legislative restriction, administrative agencies have the inherent power to reopen or to modify and rehear prior decisions. e.g., In re Trantino Parole Application, 89 N.J. 347, 364 (1982). As to the Board, N.J.S.A. 48:2-40 expressly provides that the Board at any time may order a rehearing and/or extend, revoke or modify an order made by it. e.g., Tp. of Deptford v. Woodbury Terrace Sewerage Corp., 54 N.J. 418, 425 (1969). An administrative agency may invoke its inherent power to rehear a matter "to serve the ends of essential justice and the policy of the law." Handlon v. Town of Belleville, 4 N.J. 99, 107 (1950). The power to reappraise and modify prior determinations may be invoked by administrative agencies to protect the public interest and thereby to serve the ends of essential justice. Trap Rock Industries, Inc. v. Sagner, 133 N.J.Super. 99, 109 (App. Div. 1975).

Therefore, while a significant element of the request renews unsuccessful arguments, the Board has considered each of the arguments. The Board is mindful that its decisions have a public policy impact. It is in the nature of evolving energy policy that situations change and require reevaluation. Under these circumstances, the Board has considered RESA's positions whether or not the arguments fall strictly under the standards for reconsideration. In so ruling, however, the Board emphasizes that it is not legally compelled to reconsider mere re-arguments, but rather it has exercised its discretion to consider all of the arguments on the merits.

RESA's request for reconsideration fails to provide new facts or a legal basis which would justify the Board reversing its decision. As the EDCs note, RESA's assertion that the Retail Margin Order is based on material errors of fact and law because the decision was based "exclusively on unreasonable inferences from non-descript customer switching statistics and unsupported assertions by commenters" is not supported. EDCs' Comments at 6-7. RESA in essence takes issue with the conclusions reached by the Board, and not with the underlying facts. The Board had more than sufficient support for its decision in the record since the Board did not rely

exclusively on switching statistics for its decision, and RESA fails to provide examples of faulty switching statistics or identify any unsupported assertions that were unreasonably relied on by the Board in making its decision.

A decision of the Board is valid if there is reasonable support in the record. I/M/O Public Service Electric and Gas Company, 167 N.J. 377, 393 (2001). In conjunction with its review of the switching data, the Board analyzed current and historic market behavior, TPSs administrative costs, and statutory interpretation to reasonably conclude that the Retail Margin has served its intended purpose. According to the current definition in N.J.S.A. 48:3-51, the purpose of the Retail Margin is to promote a competitive retail market for electric supply, and not simply to "equalize costs" between TPSs and EDCs, a matter that was also discussed in the Retail Margin Order. The Board recognized in the Retail Margin Order that while there may be certain costs incurred by TPSs that are not shared by the EDCs, these costs are partially offset by the TPSs' marketing advantages. Moreover, the Board continues to believe that the proliferation of TPSs shows that they are able to cover their costs of doing business. Retail Margin Order at 9-10.

This data in the aggregate persuaded the Board to conclude that the Retail Margin has served its intended purpose of promoting a competitive market. As the EDCs noted, "the Board found that there was a competitive market for customers currently paying the Retail Margin, and reasoned that any further switching should occur as a result of TPS offerings that are more attractive to those customers than the BGS rate, rather than through an artificially higher rate imposed by the Board." EDCs' Comments at 6. The Board also noted in the Retail Margin Order that the high switching rates and proliferation of competitive suppliers over an extended period show that TPSs are able to cover their costs of doing business. Retail Margin Order at 10. Based on the record developed, the Board in the Retail Margin Order concluded that the TPS market in New Jersey is well established and appears to be functioning well. Id. RESA has not proffered any evidence to the contrary.

For the first time in its request for reconsideration, RESA has raised the question of whether the Board's procedure was deficient because no provision was made for evidentiary hearings. The Board has flexibility to determine how to proceed in matters presented to it, and may use its discretion to choose the most appropriate manner including by contested case, rulemaking or informal process, based on the issues raised and the potential effects of the resolution. See, In re Request for Solid Waste Util. Customer Lists, 106 N.J. 508 (1987); In re the Petitions of MP Real Estate LP, Studebaker Submetering, Inc. and the New Jersey Apartment Association for Permission to Check-Meter Water Service, BPU Dkt Nos. WO00040254, WO00060360, WO00070510 (June 24, 2004).

The decision to eliminate the Retail Margin is a policy decision committed to the Board's discretion, and not an adjudication of any party's specific rights. N.J.S.A. 48:3-57 (a)(1) does not mandate that the Board impose the Retail Margin; it merely permits the Board to impose the charge to encourage customers to shop among competitive suppliers of electricity with the goal of creating a competitive market. Retail Margin Order at 9. The recent ruling of the New Jersey Supreme Court determined that in situations such as this one where there are no material facts actually in dispute, no evidentiary hearings are needed as long as the interested stakeholders are given notice and an opportunity to provide comments. See, In re Provision of Basic Generation Serv. for Period Beginning June 1, 2008, 2011 N.J. LEXIS 315, 29-30 (N.J. Mar. 10, 2011).

RESA has asked that the Board consider what it described as other measures that could help the State's competitive market by reducing TPS costs that RESA maintains are covered by the Retail Margin, including marketing support and a revised purchase of receivables program. RESA letter brief at 5. Board Staff has initiated a working group to address the purchase of receivables programs and the price to compare of the EDCs and the gas distribution companies within a collaborative process with the TPSs. Such a process is better suited to developing programs and procedures that can function effectively in the marketplace.

Accordingly, the Board <u>FINDS</u> that nothing in RESA's request for reconsideration challenges the facts relied on by the Board or changes the conclusions reached. RESA has not established any grounds for reconsideration of the Retail Margin Order. RESA's arguments have already been considered by the Board, and rejected. Therefore, for the reasons stated above, the Board <u>HEREBY DENIES</u> RESA's request for reconsideration of the Retail Margin Order.

DATED:

6/15/11

BOARD OF PUBLIC UTILITIES BY:

LEE A. SOLOMON PRESIDENT

JEANNE M. FOX COMMISSIONER OSEPH L. FIORDALIO

NICHOLAS ASSELTA COMMISSIONER

ATTEST:

KRISTI IZZO SECRETARY

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the within document is a true copy of the original in the files of the Board of Public

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