
BID TO TAP RENEWABLE ENERGY TRUST DECRIED

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A budget-balancing plan that would divert money from renewable energy and employee training is meeting opposition from consumer and high-technology advocates.

The Massachusetts Senate was set today to take up the plan, proposed by its budget-writing Ways and Means Committee. It calls for draining \$35 million from the state's renewable energy trust and another \$12 million from an employer-funded worker retraining fund to help close a \$600 million state budget deficit. "Green power" advocates and the Massachusetts High Technology Council blasted the move yesterday, calling it a betrayal of promises to state electric ratepayers and employers.

But Senator Therese Murray, a Democrat from Plymouth who chairs the Ways and Means Committee, said: "We need the money now. We have to close a budget deficit, and we've already cut \$343 million in the last month out of human services and health care, so we can't go there again."

The renewable energy trust has been funded since 1998 by a small tax on electric bills, currently about 40 cents a month for the typical home or small business. It is designed to fund projects such as solar and wind-power installations and energy-saving building designs.

The trust, overseen by the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, a quasi-public state agency in Westborough, has collected more than \$160 million, much of which went unspent for years before officials began rapidly earmarking funds in the last four months.

"The programs are absolutely worthwhile and are worth funding, and we're going to support them, but they've sat on this money for a long time and didn't move very quickly," Murray said.

Murray noted that "this is a one-time tap" of \$35 million that will not affect any currently authorized projects, and will not divert future collections for the fund.

But Christopher R. Anderson, president of the High-Tech Council, denounced the Senate "raid," calling it "fiscally irresponsible and an

affront to millions of electricity ratepayers in the Commonwealth.

"This backdoor procedure, done without public hearing, has no economic growth or energy development purpose, and only puts off meaningful structural solutions to excessive state spending," Anderson said.

"If this diversion prevails, families and employers who have paid into the trust fund will have one less reason to trust state government," he said.

Local 103 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the Conservation Law Foundation are also opposing any removal of funds from the renewable energy trust, saying it can help reduce dependency on Middle East gas and oil.

Larry Chretien, executive director of the Massachusetts Energy Consumers Alliance, which is working to promote solar and wind projects, said many in his group are "worried that government will never do what is necessary to make the long-term commitment to renewable energy."

He added that he thinks legislators need to show it is legal for "ratepayer funds to be diverted to the state's general fund."

Murray, however, said the state's extraordinary budget woes justify looking to all available funding sources.

"Ratepayers are also taxpayers," she said.

The work force retraining fund comes from an extra assessment paid by state employers who contribute to the unemployment insurance fund. The fund was set up in the early 1990s to collect and spend \$18 million a year, but through occasional overcollections has amassed a \$23 million surplus, \$12 million of which would be tapped under the Senate Ways and Means plan.

The Ways and Means recommendations could be amended by senators today, and also would need to be approved by House budget conferees and Governor Mitt Romney.

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