



Willis Named Next Consumers' Counsel

July 18, 2023

The Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) Governing Board voted unanimously Tuesday to appoint agency veteran Maureen Willis as Ohio's next consumers' counsel, effective Oct. 1.

The board emerged from a three-hour executive session, during which they interviewed Deputy Consumers' Counsel Angela O'Brien and Willis, OCC's acting legal director, to take the final vote. Owens Corning Senior Counsel and Dickinson Wright of counsel Madeline Fleisher had interviewed in the first round of candidates.

Members also voted to set Willis' salary at \$175,000 and to raise O'Brien's to \$155,000.

Willis, who interned with Ohio's first consumers' counsel, Bill Spratley, in 1982, will assume office one day after outgoing Consumers' Counsel Bruce Weston's retirement becomes effective on Sept. 30.

In his retirement letter, Weston thanked board Chair Mike Watkins and Watkins' predecessor, Gene Krebs, along with other board members past and present.

"Chair Watkins and Chair Krebs especially indulged many phone calls from me about consumer protection (which they would say had an uncanny coinciding with dinnertime)," he said.

Weston, who interned with Spratley in 1978, commended the board for protecting OCC's position as a standalone agency.

"The board's courage was never more important when its independence was threatened by legislation, 133-HB246 (Vitale), after the consumers' counsel opposed tainted 133-HB6 (Callender-Wilkin)," he said, calling OCC staff "heroes seeking justice for utility consumers."

The board also announced that Weston had received the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates' (NASUCA) Robert F. Manifold Lifetime Service Award.

During his regular board presentation, and before executive session, Weston noted the FY24-25 budget process had been favorable for OCC, which received an additional half million dollars, though not so favorable for utilities.

“The Legislature was not very accepting of utility opportunism in this budget,” he said. “Credit to the General Assembly.”

Watkins and Willis spoke with media outside the board meeting. He said choosing between the three finalists had been difficult due to their comparable qualifications, but that Willis had prevailed based on her institutional knowledge of OCC.

After so few applicants in the first round, Willis said she had thrown her hat in the ring in the interest of agency consistency as an independent voice for residential utility consumers, a role not all Ohio lawmakers have always supported.

“We will continue to work on our relationship with the Legislature. I think the fact that they increased the budget of OCC is a giant step,” she said.

Going forward, Willis said her policy priorities are not so different from the outgoing consumers’ counsel’s: the repeal of HB6 subsidies for the Ohio Valley Electric Corporation’s (OVEC) aging coal plants; the subjection of all utility infrastructure investments to Ohio’s “used and useful” standard; and the continuation of consumer protections she said would suffer under the current language of regulatory reform bill SB102 (Wilkin).

Willis said SB102 should allow utility charges later declared unlawful to be refunded from their inception; should end the 15-year-old system of periodic billing riders in favor of full rate cases; and should standardize past rather than future test years for utility charges.

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