

Several House Bill 6 supporters still help pick Public Utilities Commission of Ohio members

By [Jeremy Pelzer, cleveland.com](http://JeremyPelzer.cleveland.com)



Several members currently serving on the Public Utilities Commission Nominating Council supported, lobbied for, or even co-sponsored the scandal-tainted House Bill 6 energy law. (PUCO)

COLUMBUS, Ohio—A year and a half after the House Bill 6 scandal broke, more than a third of the council tasked with picking nominees to the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio

consists of men who backed, lobbied for, or even co-sponsored the infamous energy law.

That includes the chair of [the Public Utilities Commission Nominating Council](#): Michael Koren, who helped FirstEnergy Corp. lobby for the passage of HB6 in 2019. It also includes recently appointed David Wondolowski of the Cleveland Building and Trades Council, who [was a supporter of HB6 himself](#) and whose union vocally supported the legislation.

The PUCO has come under increasing scrutiny since Sam Randazzo resigned as the commission's chair in 2020 after the FBI raided his Columbus home. FirstEnergy [later admitted to bribing Randazzo](#) (as well as Householder) to [take actions](#) that benefitted the Akron-based utility.

Both Koren and Wondolowski are the appointees of Republican Gov. Mike DeWine, who signed HB6 in 2019 but signed a partial repeal last year after Republican then-Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder and four allies were [charged with using \\$60 million in FirstEnergy Corp. bribery money](#) to help pass the legislation. The law, among other things, offered a (since-rescinded) \$1 billion-plus bailout for two nuclear power plants owned by a then-subsiidiary of FirstEnergy.

Wondolowski, in an interview Monday, said he supported HB6 because one of the unions in the Building and Trades Council represents workers at one of the nuclear plants, and closing the

facility would have decimated the surrounding community. He said at the time, neither he nor the building and trades council knew about any misconduct behind the scenes.

"We would never support anything like that," Wondolowski said of the corruption, "nor did I have any knowledge of that."

Wondolowski also noted that he previously served on the governing board of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel, a utility customer advocacy group that's fought hard against HB6.

"So, I certainly am very concerned about how utilities can impact residents' bills and residents' finances," he said.

Koren declined comment Monday.

DeWine spokesman Dan Tierney said in an interview that the governor appointed Wolondowski because of his experience with the Ohio Consumers' Counsel. Wolondowski's seat on the council is specifically set aside for a representative of labor.

As for Koren, Tierney said the governor has "no criticism of his service on the nominating council."

Tierney added that the selection process for the PUCO is "a fairly transparent process."

When one of the five PUCO seats opens up, the council interviews applicants and recommends four finalists to the

governor, who then has 30 days to either choose one of them to serve (subject to Senate confirmation) or ask the council for four new names.

In January 2021, DeWine [rejected an initial list of four candidates](#) chosen by the council to take Randazzo's seat as PUCO chair, saying he would "like to consider additional capable candidates." The council submitted four new names, from which [DeWine chose former Franklin County Common Pleas Judge Jenifer French](#), a Republican, to take over as chair.

Tierney said DeWine felt French was a "judicious" pick, and the process used to pick someone like her "is generally a good way to choose somebody who's going to be on a regulatory body."

DeWine told The Plain Dealer/cleveland.com editorial board earlier this month that he is "open" to reforming the current process used to name members of the PUCO, though he didn't offer specifics beyond that.

Another nomination council member is former state Sen. Lou Terhar, a Cincinnati Republican who co-sponsored House Bill 6. Terhar is the appointee of Ohio Senate President Matt Huffman, a Lima Republican.

Terhar said Monday that critics of him serving on the council "can say what they wish.

"I'm on the council. I tend to do the duty I have on the council,"

he said.

A fourth member of the council is Steve Cuckler, who was appointed to the position by Householder. House Speaker Bob Cupp, a Lima Republican, has kept Cuckler, a former Householder aide, on the council even after Householder's arrest.

Cleveland.com has reached out to spokesmen for Huffman and Cupp for comment. Cuckler was reached by phone but said he would return the call.

Not all the PUCO Nominating Council members are fans of HB6. Mike Hartley, appointed by the governor's office as a representative of the business community, [organized a coalition](#) to push lawmakers to repeal HB6.

Attorney Kim Bojko, energy counsel for the Ohio Manufacturers Association who was appointed to the council by the Ohio State Bar Association, [has also been an outspoken opponent of HB6](#).

And Michael Watkins, a nominating council member who chairs the governing board of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel Governing Board, unsuccessfully [asked](#) Koren in 2020 to hold a special meeting of the nominating council to consider whether Koren should step down as council chair (not because of Koren personally, Watkins argued, but because he serves as a representative of public utilities).

The other four currently sitting members of the 12-member nominating council include Patrick Titterington, the chief administrative officer of the city of Troy; John Patterson, executive director of the Accountancy Board of Ohio; Matt McClellan, assistant director of the Ohio Department of Development; and Megan O'Callaghan, the city of Dublin's deputy city manager. The twelfth seat on the council, named by the Ohio Department of Aging, is currently vacant.

A seat on the PUCO itself is currently opening up: the five-year term of Dan Conway, a Republican, expires in April. The nominating council is scheduled to meet Feb. 4 to interview those who submitted applications by the Jan. 20 deadline.

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.