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## Editorial

# Crippling consumers' counsel weakens voice

**Premium content from Business First**

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Gov. **John Kasich's** proposal that the budget of Ohio's chief advocate for the public on utility rate requests be halved is a perplexing recommendation.

Despite its acumen at protecting residential and business interests, and providing a return on investment that any executive would appreciate, the Ohio Consumers' Counsel doesn't rate with the new governor. The agency may not take a dime from the state's general fund for its operations, but that hasn't prevented the Kasich administration from painting it as an expensive redundancy.

Kasich has been bold in the early months of his administration. He has locked horns with labor unions over contract rules and their debilitating effects on government budgets. He navigated his JobsOhio program through a skeptical legislature. His 2012-13 budget blueprint sets the tone for cost control and expense sharing at county and city halls across the state. He has challenged parents to take control of their children's education.

But his proposal to chop the consumers' counsel budget to \$4.1 million a year is so out of character with his call for Ohioans to take care of Ohioans that it raises questions about his motivations.

To be sure, the consumers' counsel isn't popular with power companies because it has challenged them on rate hikes. It has been at loggerheads even with the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio, which decides rate cases. But that should surprise no one: When the PUCO considers utility issues, power companies send their lawyers before commissioners to argue their side. Without the consumers' counsel, rate payers – and that includes thousands of businesses in the state – would not have an advocate in the debate.

The head of the OCC warns that slashing the agency's budget – it is funded from assessments on utility companies – would carry repercussions. "Our work would be severely crippled," Consumers' Counsel Janine Migden-Ostrander told Columbus Business First.

With the advocate weakened by a smaller budget, the system of checks and balances between rate payers and companies that control the flow of electricity and natural gas would be compromised. If anything, rate payers need a vigorous defender more than ever as lawmakers attempt to deregulate and diversify Ohio's energy markets.

Migden-Ostrander boasts that OCC has saved utility customers – many of them companies – nearly \$55 million in the past two years. On a modest operating budget of \$8.5 million a year, that means Ohioans get their money's worth from the consumers' counsel.

We appreciate the governor's conviction in trying to brighten Ohio's business climate. Clearly, the corporate community will get plenty of support from this administration. But government's obligation is to every citizen. Disabling the consumers' counsel would leave many Ohioans without a voice when they need to be heard the most. The legislature should ensure the agency remains financially healthy under the next budget.