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It's lights out for smarter energy policy in state Senate

Hold on to your light switches. The state Senate, in the late hours of Friday night, passed about the worst possible combination of utility bills imaginable.

First, the Senate stripped virtually all meaning out of a bill calling for a minimum amount of renewable energy and a program to promote energy efficiency. Then senators passed a bill reregulating the state's utilities, allowing their competition never to exceed 10% of the market.

There are several good reasons to allow utilities to return to regulation -- chief among them, the need to ensure that the state has adequate power supplies and does not become overly dependent on volatile national energy markets.

But another huge reason for reregulation is the ability of the state to chart its own destiny in the use of renewable power and energy efficiency programs. Without strong steps in that direction, reregulation becomes not just less attractive but almost meaningless. Upfront help with efficiency measures, particularly, will be the primary defense householders and small businesses have against rising energy prices.

Electricity and natural gas are going to cost more under almost any scenario. The policy question is how insistent a state should be that more of the mix comes from nontraditional sources. That includes the cheapest form, so-called nega-watts, or conservation measures that reduce demand.

Michigan has begun to look like a backwater for not insisting on a better mix of energy supplies and efficiency programs. The House, after many months of study, passed an energy package that is weak but at least starts to move the state forward. There is almost no room for compromise with the abysmal version that the Senate passed.

Consumers have every reason to be outraged, as they appear to have been the last thing on many senators' minds. So as you're flicking on a light -- or the television or the air-conditioner -- you might want to remember that you shouldn't take your power, at home or at the ballot box, for granted.
