

E&E Energywire

FERC names first-ever director of public participation office

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ENERGYWIRE | The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission announced yesterday that it has hired a former advocate for Connecticut electric and natural gas customers to lead the agency's new Office of Public Participation.

Elin Katz will serve as the first-ever director of the new division at FERC, which aims to help landowners, tribes and interested members of the public understand what the agency does and ensure that their perspectives are heard.

Katz is currently vice president of utilities at Tilson Technology Management, which deploys broadband networks around the United States. Before that, she was the head of the Connecticut Office of Consumer Counsel and represented electric and natural gas consumers in issues before that state's Public Utilities Regulatory Authority, as well as at FERC and other federal and state agencies.

First mandated by Congress in 1978 but never funded, FERC's Office of Public Participation was formally established in June after Congress set a deadline for doing so last year ([Energywire](#), March 18).

Charged with regulating the transmission of electricity, natural gas and oil across state lines, FERC has been criticized over the years for its treatment of people affected by its decisions, such as landowners living along the routes of interstate natural gas pipelines. Chairman Richard Glick, a Democrat, has said setting up the new office is a top priority.

As director of the office, Katz will help ensure that a diverse range of people can meaningfully participate in proceedings at the commission, Glick said in a statement posted on FERC's website. That will ultimately improve the commission's final decisions, he added.

"[Katz] is an accomplished attorney and has done extensive work advocating on behalf of consumers. Her leadership experience and ability to effect change is an excellent fit to drive the mission of OPP forward. I know she will do a terrific job," Glick said.

During her eight-year tenure at the Connecticut Office of Consumer Counsel, Katz set up a division focused on expanding broadband access to all residents, according to her LinkedIn profile. In addition, she worked to investigate power outages in Connecticut

following Superstorm Sandy in 2012 and other major storms, and recommended ways to improve the state's storm response, according to a professional biography posted on the state website.

Katz was also president of the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates from 2017 to 2019. At Tilson, she now leads work in support of electric utilities pursuing grid modernization, energy equity and other consumer-focused issues, FERC said in the news release.

Commissioner Allison Clements, a Democrat whom Glick selected to spearhead the office, said Katz was a "strong pick" to lead the division.

"The Commission is taking the next step in ensuring stakeholders gain access to the Commission's decision-making processes by hiring the Office of Public Participation's director," Clements said in a statement. "A strong leader is essential to supporting participation by interested individuals and communities, and I am thrilled someone of Elin Katz's caliber and character will be at the helm."

Tackling FERC's 'power dynamic'

In an email, Katz said that she was "truly honored" to be picked for the job. Slated to start at FERC in November, she added that she is focused on her current role at Tilson.

For now, Stacey Steep, an attorney-advisor at FERC, remains interim director of the office, according to the agency's website.

Last week, the office held a virtual workshop in partnership with the Department of Energy's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory to gather feedback from the public on technical assistance issues in FERC's electric proceedings. During the workshop, agency staff outlined the types of electric filings before FERC and sought advice on how to more proactively reach out to people who might have an interest in various proceedings.

Technical proceedings before FERC can be highly complex and full of legal jargon, which many Americans may not be able to easily digest, John Moore, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's Sustainable FERC Project, said during the workshop. Nonetheless, some proceedings have the potential to significantly affect energy prices, reliability and the electric resource mix, analysts say.

The Office of Public Participation could help make it easier for people to understand significant developments, including FERC's ongoing advance notice of proposed rulemaking on potential transmission planning reforms, Moore and other panelists said during the workshop.

"The reality is that the [regional transmission organizations] and the utilities are typically the ones that have access to the data and the models ... to help the proposals that they bring to FERC," Moore said. "That right there creates a challenging dynamic and a power dynamic, if you will."

With the establishment of the office and the hiring of its first director, FERC has signaled that it recognizes the barriers that the "average consumer" faces when trying to participate in FERC processes, David Springe, executive director of the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates, said in an interview. Katz will bring a strong understanding of the need for "meaningful" public engagement at FERC, said Springe, who worked with her at the association.

"These agencies are set up to be more friendly ... to people who have a lot of resources, which is why large utilities and major corporations have access. They have the resources. That doesn't work for everyday consumers out there," Springe said.

Katz will also bring to the role a strong relationship with consumer advocacy offices nationwide, said Cheryl LaFleur, a former commissioner at FERC and current chair of the ISO New England board of directors.

LaFleur said that while she supports the new office, there are many details that must be addressed when it comes to how it "will interface with other offices" at FERC.

"The demand for the new Office arose out of project cases (especially gas pipelines) and I think its potential role in that area will likely be an early focus," LaFleur said in an email. "As the office takes shape, a strong leader will be important, and Elin is a great choice."