

OUR OPINION

Impact fee shortchanges taxpayers

Rising natural gas prices have demonstrated yet again the degree to which some Pennsylvania lawmakers serve the natural gas industry rather than Pennsylvanians.

Due to majority legislators' fealty to the industry, Pennsylvania is the only gas-producing state that does not have a "severance" tax on natural gas production.

Instead, those legislators concocted a "local impact fee." As demonstrated by a new report by the Independent Fiscal Office, that fee is a gift to the gas industry, at the expense of millions of Pennsylvania taxpayers, that keeps on giving.

The IFO's report estimates that impact fee revenue rebounded in 2021 from 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic drove down gas prices. Collections totaled about \$233.8 million in 2021, about \$87.6 million more than in 2020.

As the economy recovered during 2021, natural gas prices more than doubled from 2020 prices. Coupled with production increases, the higher prices drove the value of Pennsylvania shale gas extracted in 2021 to about \$17.8 billion, according to the IFO.

But because the local impact fee serves the industry, it produced an effective tax rate of just 1.31%, far lower than the value of the severance taxes imposed by other states, all of which are greater than 1.31% and some of which range as high as 7%.

Pennsylvania's fee is variable based on the market price for natural gas. But the reason that the higher market price does not drive up the fee revenue at the same rate is that the state provides a massive discount based on the age of each producing well. A well's age affects the volume of gas that it produces, but not the market value of the gas.

According to the IFO, more than 3,200 wells entered their 11th year of operation in 2021, so they were assessed a fee about half as great as that imposed on wells between their fourth and 10th years.

The impact fee is a rip-off. Lawmakers should establish a flat severance tax based on the value of gas.

Help retain nursing staffs

Pennsylvania faced a significant nursing shortage even before the COVID-19 pandemic tore through long-term care facilities and overwhelmed hospitals. In 2019, the state government projected a shortage of 30% by 2025.

The pandemic clearly has accelerated the problem. At a legislative hearing in December, the Penn State Health System alone estimated that it needed 400 additional nurses and that its turnover rate was 14%.

Amid the pandemic public health emergency in 2020, the state government eased some licensing requirements, recognized nursing licenses issued by other states and made some other administrative changes.

Late in the year, it funded a \$5 million student loan forgiveness program using federal pandemic relief money as an incentive for nurses to continue working. It provides up to \$7,500 in loan forgiveness, payable over three years. The application runs through March 1, but 4,800 nurses already have applied.

The problem is that the \$5 million would cover only 666 of those applications at the full rate. The administration and legislators should draw on some of the \$5 billion that legislators have placed in the Rainy Day Fund to make the loan-forgiveness program as effective as possible.

Likewise, the Legislature should approve state Rep. Bridget Kosierowski's proposal to help retain nursing home and personal care home direct care providers. Those institutions face even more difficult staffing problems than do hospitals.

Kosierowski, a Lackawanna County Democrat and the only nurse in the Legislature, proposes using \$200 million from the federal relief funds for retention bonuses for front-line workers.

The pandemic continues to pose huge challenges for the health care industry and frontline workers. Legislators should respond.



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YOUR OPINION

5G tech transfer affecting seniors

Editor: Media reports focus on concerns raised by airlines that the rollout of fifth generation (5G) mobile service would interfere with aircraft technology and cause widespread flight disruptions.

However, as the country's major wireless carriers — AT&T, Verizon and T-Mobile — shut down their third generation (3G) cellular networks to make room for fourth generation (4G) and newer 5G services, many older phones will be unable to make or receive calls and text messages or use data service.

The technology transition could leave lower-income and older Pennsylvanians disconnected as they may lose cellphone service, including the ability to call 911. Moreover, older adults using personal emergency response systems — which are bands worn on the wrist or neck pendants, that, when activated, notify first responders of an emergency — must determine if their devices work as 3G service ends.

For those with mobile devices from 2012 or before, using your phone for calls is almost certainly on borrowed time. Those using personal response systems must find out now if their devices will work as 3G network service ends. If a device is pre-2019 and operates on 2G or 3G networks, it is wise to upgrade the device. Contact the manu-

facturer or the company providing monitoring services for the device.

Act now so that you don't lose 911 ability and cellular connectivity. Visit your carrier's website for information on their 3G retirement plan. Contact your carrier if you haven't already received information. Ask if your phone or other connected devices will be impacted. Be prepared to upgrade to a newer device and ask about discounts, promotions and free upgrades.

The Federal Communications Commission has a consumer guide to help. It is called the "Plan Ahead for Phase Out of 3G Cellular Networks and Service" and can be found on the FCC website ([fcc.gov/consumers/guides](https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides)).

TERESA OSBORNE
 SCRANTON

Editor's note: The writer is a former Pennsylvania secretary of aging and a longtime advocate for seniors.

Methane emissions pose health threats

Editor: A federal plan to strengthen methane rules on emissions from oil and gas operations cannot come soon enough.

More than 1.5 million Pennsylvanians live within a half-mile of methane-emitting oil and gas wells and a massive network of pipelines, compressor stations and power plants. Thousands more live near plastics plants and other petrochemical

complexes planned or already being built across the commonwealth.

Shale gas development, often referred to as fracking, is particularly concerning. My organization, the Environmental Health Project, has studied the issue and talked to more than 100 Pennsylvania residents who report health impacts from shale gas development.

Research shows that people exposed to pollution from shale gas operations are at greater risk of developing respiratory issues, like persistent coughs, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Those with existing health conditions may suffer worsening symptoms and are more likely to land in the hospital. Studies also show that people who live near shale gas sites and are pregnant have a higher risk of delivering babies pre-term or with birth defects. Higher risks of cancer are likely as well.

Methane is a global threat, too. Greenhouse gasses such as methane accelerate climate change and spawn a worsening of the storms, droughts, fires and other extreme weather events we see nearly every day. Higher temperatures increase the likelihood of respiratory illnesses, heart problems, insect-borne diseases and heat-associated deaths. Air pollution is linked to roughly 4.5 million deaths worldwide annually.

We must do more to protect our families from harm-

ful pollution. Stronger rules on methane emissions are a good start.

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Recommit to more perfect union

Editor: This has been a dark period. The pandemic is still with us and former President Donald Trump's legacy remains.

Regarding race, we have slowly and sometimes begrudgingly made progress. Yes, we elected and reelected our first Black president. But that achievement has been followed by this period of aggravement and resentment.

Who could have imagined that the U.S. Capitol would be overrun by angry and violent "patriots" trying to deny the election certification of President Joe Biden?

Why were they encouraged to storm the Capitol by the sitting president?

And why do aggrieved people continue to show up armed — at the homes of Democratic elected officials in state capitals — ready to do violence?

Who could have imagined that the lives of U.S. elected officials would be endangered?

We gain more evidence every day about the insurrection and the fact that we can expect more such violence. The Trumpists discourage voting — our most precious right — because they know they can't win elections honestly.

Even Republican senators play along with the lies and the violence. That is most discouraging.

Is this the new norm? Is this what will be in store for our children and grandchildren? Have we left behind the commitment to improve our country — to aim high and to serve all our people and make it a more perfect union?

We can only hope that this dark age is on its way out and that we can recommit ourselves to improving not destroying this nation, until recently, known for its possibilities.

SONDRA MYERS
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THE NEW YORK TIMES FILE

An image from an infrared camera shows an oil well methane leak in 2019 at a west Texas drilling site. A writer calls for stronger regulations on methane emissions from natural gas and oil production facilities.

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