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Our View: Long overdue: State should reform PRC

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It's not just the scandals, such as the commissioner convicted last month of credit card fraud, identity theft and embezzlement. Or the one before that convicted of bashing a romantic rival in the head with a rock. Or the one before that arrested at the Albuquerque airport leaving for a trip on official business with marijuana in her suitcase. Or the one before that who lost an \$840,000 sexual harassment judgment filed by a staff member in a civil case.

No, the problems of the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission run far deeper than that. It is, quite simply, a board with too much power, too few requirements to serve and virtually no oversight.

A high school dropout who earns enough votes on election day can suddenly be thrust into the position of deciphering complex utility rate cases, electricity transmission grids and insurance rules — among a wide array of other interests.

When the New Mexico Legislature combined the old State Corporation Commission and Public Utility Commission into the PRC in 1996, it created a massive regulatory board that has oversight of everything from gas pipelines to taxi cabs.

The PRC has a broader jurisdiction than any state utility regulatory agency in the nation, according to the Santa Fe-based public policy group Think New Mexico. It is headed by a five-person elected board that must meet only three requirements to serve: be at least 18 years old, a resident of New Mexico and have no prior felony convictions.

Think New

Mexico, which in the past has successfully advocated for such things as full-day kindergarten, a repeal of the food tax and reform of both the lottery scholarship and title insurance, has proposed a series of common-sense reforms for the PRC.

Their proposal would split insurance into a separate

department, move authority for the State Fire Marshal to the Department of Homeland Security & Emergency Management, consolidate corporate reporting in the Office of the Secretary of State, give the Department of Health authority over ambulances and deregulate market entry and rates of motor carriers.

It would also require PRC candidates to have either a four-year college degree or five years of relevant professional experience. Think New Mexico notes that nationwide, 89 percent of utility commissioners have a college degree, while in New Mexico 44 percent of PRC commissioners did not have a college degree when elected.

We also know from recent experience that, once elected, commissioners don't even have to show up for work. Jerome D. Block Jr., the latest commissioner to run afoul of the law, was simply coming in every two weeks to pick up his paycheck before finally pleading guilty and stepping down.

The state has set up a commission that is too big to fail, and then has done absolutely nothing to prevent failure. It's past time for a change.

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