

Consider the Source Before Giving Your Trust Blindly

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Senator Smith writes about bipartisan legislation to ensure local control of Wisconsin's electric grid, and what is true and not true about Right of First Refusal (ROFR) legislation.

MADISON - I receive hundreds of emails a week about a variety of issues. Some are original and informed, while others are auto-generated form emails. Certain advocacy groups have a history of harnessing misinformation and outrage to drive such emails.

In my time as an elected official, I've learned a lot about what advocacy groups to trust. Every background information memo received from advocacy groups must be combed over closely to understand why they want me to support or oppose legislation. Trust goes a long way in politics, but verification is equally important.

Recently, at a public hearing of the Senate Committee on Utilities and Technology, we held a public hearing on Senate Bill 481 (SB 481). Testimony at that hearing clearly demonstrated the importance of trust in politics. SB 481 has to do with allowing Wisconsin's existing electric utilities to have the first opportunity to expand and enhance our current energy infrastructure

and for them to be regulated by the Wisconsin Public Service Commission, our state's utility regulators. The nickname for this bill is the "Right of First Refusal," or ROFR (pronounced *ROW -fer*) for short.

This legislation was introduced last session, and advocacy groups like Americans for Prosperity leveled unproven claims unsupported by facts. This group notoriously sounds and looks like a grassroots group, but it's funded by wealthy corporations. They've used baseless attacks on good bills, because there's money to be made for out-of-state, unknown corporations. These corporations want to take control of our electric distribution infrastructure, replacing trusted providers who have served Wisconsin for decades.

Before the recent public hearing, folks across the state were getting emails and seeing social media ads saying this bill would increase electricity rates. Trusting this information, folks put their names on form emails declaring their opposition to the bill and demanding we vote "no."



Unfortunately many people gave their trust without verifying the source or the accuracy of this information. Throughout the hearing we heard conjecture and "free-market" political ideology that managed to convince people, without evidence, to believe rate increases are inevitable.

During the hearing, my colleagues and I repeatedly asked opponents of this bill for hard evidence backing up their claims. Oddly, the only documentation used as proof was that rates have increased 10% over the last decade. They offered no evidence that the increases were linked to policies like these.

Legislation like ROFR has been passed in other states, so there should be evidence, but these individuals couldn't provide documentation because *rate increases didn't happen*.

Building transmission lines and associated infrastructure for the 21st century is expensive. It gets more expensive when delays and missteps occur, as we've seen in other states where the bidding process was too loose and left to oversimplification. This bill prevents unnecessary costs and preserves what little control our state has in developing reliable and affordable energy infrastructure.



Do we want to be at the mercy of out-of-state “one size fits all” entities? It's happening in other states, but Wisconsin doesn't need to be added to that list. When we invest in local companies, we invest in companies that are more responsive to our local needs.

ROFR is a bipartisan effort to preserve Wisconsin control in our energy infrastructure. We don't encounter this kind of bipartisan agreement every day, and it says a lot about the aim of this bill and how it will help Wisconsin.

It's wise to investigate all sides of an argument before handing over your trust. There is plenty of information at your fingertips. Every bill proposed has a public analysis done by the Legislative Reference Bureau, a legislative nonpartisan service agency.

Before posting misinformed comments or signing your name to emails someone else has composed for you, take the time to look up the bill and ask questions of the bill's authors. You can always count on my office to give you details and relevant information whenever you as a constituent contact me about an issue.

Trust must constantly be earned and reaffirmed to be lasting and meaningful, and that's as it should be. Your trust is important – don't give it up too easily.

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.

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