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Our standard at the *Tamp.*
Times is simple: to get the
right the

A Times editorial

Utilities don't care about saving power

Just as consumers and local governments are further embracing conservation, clean energy and more sustainable living practices, Florida's biggest utilities are backing away from those goals. The state should halt this retreat and force the power companies to redouble their efforts toward energy efficiency. That would benefit consumers, send the right message to industry and help protect the environment and public health in Florida.

Utilities proposed energy-reduction goals of "zero" or nearly zero during hearings held in Tallahassee last week before the Florida Public Service Commission. State law requires publicly owned utilities and some municipal utilities to submit 10-year efficiency goals to the PSC every five years. The process is aimed at encouraging customers to reduce their power consumption by upgrading the weather protection on their homes or businesses, installing more energy-efficient appliances and equipment or taking other steps. But as the *Tampa Bay Times'* Malena Carollo reported, the utilities proposed benchmarks that both environmentalists and state consumer advocates dismissed for how little energy savings they produce. Duke Energy Florida requested a 15 percent reduction from its target in 2014, the last time around. Tampa Electric Co. was the only utility to propose a higher goal, but environmentalists say the increase is negligible and the company could do more. Four of the seven utilities subject to the law proposed goals of zero for the 2020-2029 period.

The companies justified their moves by declaring that improvements in the building code and in energy-efficient appliances make their own incentives unnecessary. Utilities have offered a range of programs to reduce consumption, from discounts or rebates on new air conditioners, water heaters and appliances to savings on insulating ceiling and plumbing or installing energy-efficient lighting. Homeowners and businesses could lose out, because lower goals translate

into fewer energy programs the utilities offer. That's exactly the opposite of what consumers want, of where technology is headed and of the policy that Florida needs to protect the low-lying state from the impacts of a warming climate.

Florida already has the second-worst performance in energy efficiency delivered to consumers in the Southeast region, beating only Alabama, according to the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy. As a portion of annual electricity sales in 2017, the most recent data available, Florida's efficiencies were one-fifth the national average, the group found. The efficiency targets for 2020-2029 are lower than in the last round of goal-setting, in 2014, which themselves were lower than in the period before.

This race to the bottom isn't going unnoticed by local governments in Florida, which are busy hardening their infrastructure, sponsoring solar cooperatives and — like the state — hiring new chief resilience officers to prepare for climate impacts. The cities of St. Petersburg, Dunedin, Largo and others across Florida have implored the PSC to use this goal-setting process to support — not undermine — these efforts at the state and local levels.

The PSC's goal-setting process is an all-too-rare opportunity to move consumer protection, technological innovation and climate resilience forward in a meaningful way. The commission should establish robust targets to encourage the most efficient use of Florida's precious energy resources.