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## Left powerless

**Report on electricity choice reveals city missing a lot**  
 April 8, 2008 - 10:53PM

The Brownsville Herald

The cost of just about everything is going up. Those increases are led - in fact most agree they're driven - by soaring energy prices as fuel costs continue to climb.

Energy costs for most Texans could be worse, however.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation last month issued a report that determined that electricity deregulation in the state has helped most homeowners. The report can be read on the foundation's Web site, [www.texaspolicy.com](http://www.texaspolicy.com).

According to the report, "Texas Electric Meter: Measuring the Effects of Electricity Deregulation," since full deregulation took effect in January 2007, Texans' choice has grown to 17 retail providers and about 100 different rate plans. And while oil and natural gas prices have skyrocketed in the past two years, the average consumer rate for electricity actually went down 5 percent as a result of competition, the TPPF report revealed.

More importantly, deregulation has led to increased investment in power generation. More than \$20 billion in generating facilities have already been brought online, and another \$25 billion is either under construction or planned, the foundation reports.

Because of the state's power grid setup, this new generating capacity has benefited the Rio Grande Valley. Many Valley areas have enjoyed more than a year without any power outages or brownouts, even during the hottest summer days when the demand was greatest.

Unfortunately, that is about the only benefit many Brownsville residents have enjoyed. Those who remain locked into the municipal utility monopoly aren't able to switch to other providers or plans that better suit their needs.

Granted, the Brownsville Public Utilities Board insists that it maintains competitive rates, but those rates should be significantly lower. PUB doesn't bear the "stranded costs" of the investment in expensive nuclear power plants that most commercial power companies are still trying to recoup; neither does it have the pressure competition imposes on companies to continuously upgrade and improve their equipment, as was recently evident when it was revealed that many meters weren't working properly, or had even that many had been disabled or otherwise tampered with. Audits have found PUBto be top-heavy and inefficient in its operations.

Sadly, however, the money-hungry city views the utility as a source of revenue, to fund other projects. We've already seen this mayor try to impose new fees to PUB bills to pay for items completely unrelated to utility generation or consumption. As long as that is the case, residents will continue to pay more than otherwise would be necessary for their electricity.

Like his predecessors, Mayor Ahumada has empanelled a charter review committee to see how he can tailor the City Charter to benefit himself. This might be a good time for residents to ask city officials to grant them the same privilege most Texans already enjoy: the freedom to choose the electricity company and plan that best suits their needs.

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