

Activists renew push on National Fuel

Ask firm to help poor save energy, money

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A coalition of community activists renewed its push Thursday for National Fuel Gas Co. to make changes in the utility's customer energy conservation program to focus more on weatherization programs for low-income consumers.

The National Fuel Accountability Coalition, made up of more than a dozen community organizations, held a "stakeholder meeting" in the afternoon to publicly repeat its call for reforms to the company's Conservation Incentive Program, which is funded by ratepayers.

The Rev. M. Bruce McKay, pastor of Pilgrim-St. Luke's United Church of Christ in Buffalo, said the group would like to meet with top National Fuel executives to discuss their ideas for the conservation program. National Fuel representatives, including Donna L. DeCarolis, its vice president of business development, met in December with members of VOICE-Buffalo, a faith-based community group.

"In many ways, what we're asking is not outrageous," McKay said. "We'll continue to push for a hearing that the [state Public Service Commission] would hold on the allocation of these funds."

The PSC in November agreed to add \$150,000 to the budget for low-income weatherization work through National Fuel's \$10 million Conservation Incentive Program. But the increase was just a fraction of the more than \$10 million jump in funding that the lead activist group, People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH), had sought in its high-profile and controversial push to expand the Amherst-based utility's conservation program.

"The Conservation Incentive Program is not a housing rehabilitation program and should not be repurposed as one," said Karen L. Merkel, a National

Fuel spokeswoman. The program "is designed to advance energy efficiency for all National Fuel customers across all income levels."

The accountability coalition on Thursday also called for a reduction in executive compensation at the company. David F. Smith, National Fuel's chairman and chief executive officer, received more than \$7 million in total compensation last year.

The group also called for National Fuel to scale back its rapidly growing natural gas drilling operations in the Marcellus Shale region in northwestern Pennsylvania, where the company controls the drilling rights on nearly 750,000 acres of land.

Instead, National Fuel is stepping up its Marcellus drilling. The company on Wednesday said it had agreed to sell its oil and natural gas wells in the Gulf of Mexico in a \$70 million deal that will raise additional money for its accelerated Marcellus drilling plans in Pennsylvania.

Merkel said National Fuel disagrees with PUSH's tactics, which it believes are designed to divide the community and "erode the public's trust" of its conservation program.

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