

## **Care for Creation in State's Energy Standards Debate**

OP-ED ON SB 310

By Jeff Bohrer, Archdiocese of Cincinnati Property Manager, and Tony Stieritz, Archdiocesan Catholic Social Action Office Director

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How will Ohio proceed with caring for our natural environment? That is up for debate right now in the state legislature. According to a visionary set of energy efficiency and renewable energy standards enacted in 2008, by the year 2025, 25 percent of the electricity sold by each utility or electric services company within Ohio must be generated from alternative energy sources. Furthermore, utilities must achieve 22 percent in energy savings by that year as well. However, the Ohio General Assembly is fast-tracking a bill, SB 310, that questions these standards. It proposes to freeze the prescribed yearly increases in these standards while a study takes place.

We do not intend to advocate against SB 310, or for one set of benchmarks over another. However, we do wish to emphasize that our responsibility to care for God's creation must be closer to the center of the debate.

Many faith leaders, including our most recent popes since Saint John Paul II, have urged us to act out of prudence when it comes to our impact upon the environment. Because of the deadly ramifications of doing nothing, they have compelled us to take seriously the preponderance of scientific evidence for climate change and to act to mitigate its effects.

This does not mean that we must today toss our lives into chaos to make adjustments. But it does urge all sectors of our society, including governments, businesses, consumers and faith communities, to take leadership roles in addressing these threats to the world that our children will inherit.

While not perfect, what has been encouraging about Ohio's current energy standards is that they have provided incentives for household and commercial users to make better energy efficiency choices. Furthermore, they direct our utilities to proactively educate consumers about what we can do to use less energy and lower our utility bills.

We do not propose to be experts on every aspect of this issue, and claims by different lobbyists regarding the impact of the current standards on the everyday utility bill payer seem to entirely contradict each other.

However, speaking purely from the experience of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, we can say that current policies have facilitated our work to lessen our carbon footprint, and consequently, our energy bills are significantly lowered. This in turn allows our parishes and schools to be better stewards of the generous contributions of our faithful. Like for so many other consumers, the incentives are enabling us to overcome upfront capital hurdles, so that we can more feasibly bring energy efficiency projects from paper to fruition. For example, one of our high schools took advantage of the utility rebate incentives to complete a \$300,000 energy upgrade. The result was much improved lighting, which provided a more positive atmosphere for learning, and greater comfort due to a highly efficient, well controlled boiler. Such boiler replacement and

lighting retrofit projects are becoming quite numerous for many aging Archdiocesan facilities, as they are for so many other institutions in our communities. Reasonable incentives that help provide the impetus to make our homes and institutions more energy efficient, and less costly to run, just seems to make sense for every utility bill payer.

The Catholic bishops of Ohio recently issued some reflections on the debate of SB 310. They are asking elected officials “to prayerfully consider if it would be more prudent for the sake of our environmental stewardship to maintain our current policies and not freeze these standards while the study takes place.” These reflections follow Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI’s earlier urging our societies to “encourage more sober lifestyles, while reducing their energy consumption and improving its efficiency” (2010 World Day of Peace Message, no. 9).

We certainly welcome any effort to study how to improve Ohio’s policies in this area and lower any potential costs that could be passed on to consumers. In addition to that, though, what we encourage our legislators to further consider is how our state will continue to lead us in protecting God’s creation. If not through our current policies, then how?

Jeff Bohrer is the Property Manager for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati

Tony Stieritz is the Director of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati Catholic Social Action Office

For more information:

Tony Stieritz

Director, Catholic Social Action

Archdiocese of Cincinnati

100 East 8th St.

Cincinnati, Ohio 45202

(513) 421-3131, ext. 2661

[tstieritz@catholiccincinnati.org](mailto:tstieritz@catholiccincinnati.org)

[www.CatholicCincinnati.org/SocialAction](http://www.CatholicCincinnati.org/SocialAction)