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Council Vote on Zarker Wasn't Taken Lightly

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Guest columnist

Council vote on Zarker wasn't taken lightly

By Peter Steinbrueck
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In January, Mayor Greg Nickels asked the City Council to "do its duty" in the process of reconfirming the superintendent of Seattle City Light.

We have done that.

After five weeks of appeals to Seattle residents and city employees for their input, a dozen community council meetings, four public hearings, and hundreds of letters, phone calls, faxes, e-mails and in-depth conversations, the council can say it did its duty of evaluating Gary Zarker's suitability to lead City Light for another four years.

Public power is a sacred trust that must be guarded and protected.

The people of Seattle own our power utility — a rare gift — and expressed to us the gravity of this decision.

We heard from people that could ill-afford the 58 percent rate increase of the past three years — the highest increase of all local utilities, and employees who felt dismissed by the policies of the superintendent.

Conversely, we heard from top City Light managers, union leaders and other business interests on why it would be detrimental to fire a well-known leader at a precarious time for the utility.

We scrutinized Zarker's experience. City Light was a well-established public utility before he took over in 1994. To his credit, Zarker expanded inexpensive hydroelectric-power resources, sought alternative clean-energy sources and created a reliable outage-response system.

Zarker also inherited an $800 million debt that has more than doubled since he took over. During the energy crisis, City Light ran up a half-billion dollars of short-term debt that our electricity-rate increases are now paying off.

Still, the long-term debt languishes. Bond indexes have downgraded the utility's rating so that we are paying higher interest on this debt.

While no one could possibly blame Zarker for the energy crisis, as superintendent he was responsible for advising the council and mayor which way the winds were blowing, and for steering the ship. The city's elected officials are not energy-industry experts, but the superintendent must be.

We felt we were not well-advised on resource-allocation decisions and not given the best information about risk-management issues. When a costly billing problem struck the utility, answers were hard to come by, for City Light customers and for the council.

Finally, an audit by the respected Vantage Consulting firm found numerous management and operational problems at City Light that the superintendent did not dispute.

What the reconfirmation vote came down to, ultimately, was the judgment of each individual City Council member on Zarker's leadership. Those viewpoints were expressed eloquently, pointedly and painstakingly at a council meeting last week.

While council members acknowledge our role in City Light governance and policy guidance, each of us knows that we need expert advice on energy issues, from our analysts and most importantly from the superintendent. Taken in that light, enough council members felt that they were not getting the best advice, and decisions that were made by this superintendent did not reflect the most prudent judgments at the time.

In announcing Zarker's resignation, Nickels correctly stated that we will not let this decision change the course we've set for City Light. The council, in collaboration with the mayor, has created a roadmap for the future success of the utility. Zarker began the journey down that road.

The new superintendent we seek should be an expert on utility management, a player in the power industry and a strong leader. Our public utility deserves that.

We thank the employees of City Light who continued to work hard throughout this tumultuous year, and through what will invariably be a tough transition. The reward for them will be a better utility.

We also thank Zarker, for his years of dedicated service to the city, and as a representative of the utility in regional and national discussions on energy matters. The character he displayed during this difficult process was commendable.

When the mayor nominates and the council approves a new superintendent, that person will be greeted by a council humbled by this experience, but better informed and dedicated to serious reform. We have expanded our utility oversight committee, increased our utility staff analysts and created a separate citizen advisory panel to offer new perspectives on the decisions we face.

There are numerous reforms underway to improve City Light, and the decision to seek a new superintendent is one of them.