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Power industry faces clean-energy reckoning

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

A battle continues over energy regulation proposals that failed to muster the power needed to make it through the Illinois Legislature this summer.

Neither the utility industry nor clean-power advocates are happy with the present state of talks that fell apart

on the last day of the spring session. The unprecedented effort to rework energy policy in Illinois is viewed as critical to the survival of power plants throughout the state, as well as the direction of renewable energy programs.

Left pending are proposals that have the potential to zap the pocket-books of both consumers and utilities.

The last time policy saw such massive change was in the mid-1990s when customers became interested in shopping for their own electric supply. By 1997, Illinois had approved electric deregulation that kept utilities as regulated delivery companies but allowed them to operate on the free market, which those companies

said has done a lot to keep costs reasonable for consumers in the years since.

Patrick Evans, president of the Illinois Energy Association, said the Land of Lincoln has one of the largest electric power industries of any state, representing a large investment.

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'Uncle Gene' lends history of goodwill to Love a Senior Day

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Eugene Verdu has dedicated his life as a missionary, teacher, gerontologist, and advocate for needy children. Now he's lending his inspiration to a special one-day event that will celebrate America's fastest-growing demographic.

"Love a Senior Day," a celebration of the contributions of senior citizens, will be held at Belle-Clair Fairgrounds & Expo Center on Oct. 8. A new public charity called the Uncle Gene Foundation, recently founded by Verdu, has accepted an invitation to be the host organization and will collaborate with the nonprofit Love a Senior Company to present the event.

The day will feature area vendors, food, music, presentations, senior performances, prizes, guest speakers, and fun for the family.

"It's going to be a big day," said host organizer Mike Stith, who has been busy lining up sponsors. Stith is volunteering as director of the Uncle Gene Foundation and works closely with and is a volunteer director for Love a Senior Company, a Pueblo, Colo.-based nonprofit that offers free events for seniors around the country.

"We're getting great early support from sponsors and vendors, as well as from St. Clair County, and support from local mayor's offices," Stith said.



Gene Verdu, of Belleville, whose new Uncle Gene Foundation will help benefit seniors and needy children.

So far, sponsors include Cambridge House Retirement Communities, Ameren Illinois, and St. Clair County Interdepartmental Grants. Early vendors include EmpowerMe Wellness, The Esquiline, St. Clair County Transit District, Cedars of Lebanon Apartments, Bradford Place Assisted Living, Adaptive Equipment&

Caregiving Corner, Clear Captions, St. Clair County Housing Authority, St. Clair County Mental Health Board, Brightly Senior Living, and TreeHouse Wildlife Center (in Jersey County).

The aim of Love a Senior Day is to provide an opportunity for seniors to get out for a day of fun.

"We've all been cooped up

too long," Stith said.

Fliers will be distributed in August and billboards are planned, he said. People will need tickets to access the event, but they are free and available at participating businesses.

With the fairgrounds rented and the vendors and sponsors now showing interest, Stith said the biggest hurdle might be the pandemic and where things stand in October. But "it's a large enough venue where we can socially distance and require masks, if necessary," he said.

Stith, of Edwardsville, is the founder of One Legacy LLC, a company he formed several years ago to promote meaningful senior activities and collect the life stories of people in their retirement years.

One of his life's best experiences, he said, has been meeting Verdu, who turns 81 this month and who has had a notable career at home and abroad.

Verdu's philanthropy began as a teenager, working as a Catholic missionary for the Jesuit Papal Volunteers. It continued for more than 50 years as he helped hundreds of children in Belize.

His work began in 1961, at age 19, when he was invited to be schoolteacher in San Ignacio, Belize. He taught there for just two years but returned many times afterwards to visit the many close friends he met while teaching.

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Loan lets older homeowners look forward by thinking in reverse

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

Increasingly, a loan program born decades ago is keeping older homeowners in their residences for longer periods.

Reverse mortgages were officially authorized by the U.S. government in the 1980s, but the first one, according to some, may have taken place 60 years ago in Portland, Maine.

The loan option has helped more than 1.2 million homeowners since the beginning, said Steve Irwin, president of the National Reverse Mortgage Lenders Association based in Washington.

A reverse mortgage is basically a loan that under the right circumstances would allow a borrower to age in place. Reverse mortgages allow people 62 and older ac-

cess to the home equity they have built up in their homes. Payment of the loan is deferred until the property owner dies, sells, or moves out. Because there are no required mortgage payments on a reverse mortgage, interest is added to the loan.

Eligible property types include single-family homes, two- to four-unit properties, manufactured homes (built

after June 1976), condominiums, and townhouses. Co-ops do not qualify.

Borrowers are responsible for property taxes and homeowner's insurance.

Borrowers can choose a payment plan of their choice. They can:

- Establish a line of credit;

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Physicians Groups of Southwestern Illinois Pages 9-11



ILLINOIS BUSINESS JOURNAL ROUTING SLIP

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UNCLE GENE

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While visiting, he witnessed many children with severe orthopedic disabilities. One, was an infant name Ian, the child of one of his friends. The child was in desperate need of help.



Stith

When he returned to the United States, Verdu met with several local businessmen to discuss the challenges he saw in Belize. One day he was introduced to the board at Shriners Hospital. When its members heard the story about Ian, they agreed to help by bringing the child to St. Louis for critical surgery, at no cost to the family.

“That was just the beginning,” Stith said. “To this day, Mr. Verdu is humbled and appreciative of the generosity of Shriners to have helped more than 400 children over the past 50 years.”

To further the effort, Verdu also collaborated with other local businessmen, including several members of Rotary Club (District 6510). The program began with bringing just a few kids here a year for surgery and evolved to bringing dozens or more per year, all managed by Verdu, who also enlisted several local families to host the children, often for months at a time, while they rehabilitated.

The amazing combination of caring and community collaboration became known as The Belize Children’s Project, which continues helping disabled kids to this day. For the past 15 years, Verdu has served as diplomatic Consulate of Belize for the Greater St. Louis area.

After leaving his teaching career, Verdu decided to focus on another true passion, that of helping the elderly.

After working as a social worker in East St Louis for a few years, he decided to study gerontology. A few years later he began teaching senior education courses part time at Southwest Illinois College. He became such a skilled grant writer that the college asked to use one of the federal grants and launched a program to provide services for area seniors citizens. Programs and Services for Older Persons (PSOP) was founded in Belleville. Today, Verdu works as director at St. Clair County Office on Aging. He was inducted in 2018 into the Illinois Department on Aging’s Senior Illinoisan Hall of Fame for Community Service. He is also a former, longtime member of the SWIC board.

“Gene Verdu is a legend in St. Clair County. There are many senior programs that wouldn’t exist without Gene Verdu,” Stith said.

The two men met for the first time a couple of years ago. Verdu asked Stith to help him write a book to share stories with his nieces and nephews. Before too long they both agreed that it was more fitting to share the story with the world.

“He is referred to as Uncle Gene because he has 27 nieces and nephews in the U.S., but also many friends and former patients in Belize that still call him Uncle Gene,” said Stith, who has accompanied Verdu on a couple of trips there and witnessed the affection people throughout the country have for him.

The autobiography called, “Uncle Gene Returns to Belize,” is scheduled for publication later this year and will be

ready for presale at Love a Senior Day. In writing the book, Verdu’s only stipulation is that all proceeds will be donated to charity. His newly formed non-profit charity, called the Uncle Gene Foundation, will direct all proceeds to seniors and needy children in Metro East communities.

Creation of the Uncle Gene Foundation allows Verdu to continue his legacy of giving to those in need.

“I’ve often heard him say, ‘Give ’til it hurts’,” Stith said.

To learn more about the Uncle Gene Foundation visit www.unclegenefoundation.org.

The Love a Senior Company (www.loveasenior.org) is a nonprofit organization founded by Carol Chiarito. Its mission is to celebrate aging through the sharing of ideas, stories and resources for the greater learning on how

to tackle the future instead of fearing it. Its board is comprised of people who have been caretakers now or in the past.

The organization hosts one or two events per year like the one planned in Belleville. All proceeds go toward future programs and events for seniors. A donation is provided to the hosting non-profit organization. Love a Senior Company also produces a national podcast called Senior Moments (www.loveasenior.org/senior-moments/), hosted by Chiarito.

The Belleville Love a Senior Day will be the fifth such event put on by the organization. The event here was originally planned for 2020 but sidelined like everything else by the pandemic.

For more information about being a sponsor or vendor at Love a Senior Day, visit www.loveasenior.org/lasd.

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