



When Republicans Turn on Republicans: Why Montanans Pay the Price

By Lisa Bennett

The Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) is supposed to be a safeguard for Montana families — a watchdog protecting ratepayers from unjustified utility costs. Instead, it has become a case study in how internal fractures within the Montana Republican Party can spill into public governance and leave ordinary Montanans footing the bill.

Despite being composed entirely of Republicans — most of them professing conservatives — the PSC is mired in secrecy, infighting, and financial mismanagement. And the consequences are real: when the PSC breaks down, Montanans pay more for electricity, natural gas, water, and telecommunications.

Below is what's happening, why it matters, and why every Montana ratepayer should care.

Escalating Concerns Over Spending

Public frustration is growing as the PSC refuses to disclose the cost of its internal investigation into Commissioner Brad Molnar. When Montanan Ron Happ raised the issue during public comment, Commissioner Randy Pinocci pushed for answers — only to be stonewalled by the PSC's own Response Team.

Pinocci ultimately wrote to Governor Greg Gianforte after PSC Legal refused to provide basic financial information:

"I sent a request to David Smith in the PSC Legal Department asking about costs incurred in the investigation against Commissioner Molnar and when I didn't get any response back, I felt I had to write the letter to the governor."

The Liberty Bell contacted David Smith in the PSC's Legal Department to ask whether the cost information had been provided to Commissioner Pinocci by press time. Smith responded, "I don't have anything to say about that," and referred The Liberty Bell to the PSC's Public Relations Department. The PR Department returned the call at the end of 2025 but said they were unaware of Pinocci's request or whether it had been fulfilled, though they would look into it. As of publication, The Liberty Bell has not received any further response from the PSC's Public Relations Department.

Commissioner Molnar has raised similar concerns. He reports that Commissioner Jennifer Fielder asked him and Pinocci to give up their travel budgets due to alleged cost overruns — only for PSC Accounting to confirm the Commission was *not* out of money.

Molnar concluded that either Fielder misled him or she was trying to cover the ballooning cost of outside attorneys working on the investigation against him.

A Process Built to Fail

Commissioner Fielder denies authoring the PSC's internal policy manual, but Commissioner Pinocci — who served on the policy committee — says the process was tightly controlled by her, with little meaningful input allowed.

Pinocci eventually stopped attending committee meetings, saying his presence was being used to create the illusion of broad participation while real authority rested with Fielder.

Molnar adds that the manual centralized power in a way that made it easy to remove a sitting PSC President — a mechanism used against him in October of 2025.

A Budget in Crisis

Molnar warns that the investigation has crippled the PSC's ability to challenge utility rate increases:

“The lack of transparency into the cost of this investigation has more than hampered our ability to use budgeted funds for their intended purpose — hiring attorneys to investigate rate increase requests and energy sales that might not be in the best interests of Montana ratepayers.”

He fears that outside counsel bills — delayed but accruing — could bankrupt the PSC's discretionary fund.

Leadership Manipulation

On October 21, 2025, Commissioners Fielder, Bukacek, and Welborn amended the PSC manual to lower the threshold for removing a president from four votes to three. They immediately used the new rule to oust Molnar and install Welborn.

Molnar argues that while Welborn holds the title, Fielder effectively runs the Commission. Welborn has repeatedly delegated presidential duties — including chairing meetings — back to Fielder.

Molnar describes a pattern of manipulation:

“Welborn assured Commissioner Pinocci that if he were allowed to chair, he would vote to rescind Fielder's letter seeking my suspension... But when the vote came, Welborn did the opposite — betraying his word and siding with Fielder.”

Polygraphs and Accountability

In a rare move for elected officials, Commissioners Molnar and Pinocci voluntarily took independent polygraph tests to prove their honesty regarding the investigation. Both passed with strong scores.

Fielder, Bukacek, Welborn, Executive Director Alana Lake, and Acting Chief Legal Counsel Amanda Weber all declined to take the polygraph — despite being offered the opportunity at Molnar's expense.

A Pattern of Secrecy and Bad Faith

The sequence of events — policy changes, concentration of authority, refusal to verify statements, and financial opacity — paints a troubling picture.

Whether intentional or not, the effect is the same:

- The PSC's credibility is damaged
- Ratepayers are left unprotected

- The investigation drags on without transparency
- And the public is left in the dark

The longer this continues, the more it harms Montana families and businesses who rely on the PSC to keep utility costs fair.

Why This Matters

This is not just an internal dispute. It is a warning about what happens when political factions turn inward and lose sight of the people they are elected to serve.

Montanans deserve transparency.

Montanans deserve accountability.

Montanans deserve a PSC that works for them — not against them.

Stay Informed

Our next article will be on how NW Energy was granted their rate increase when only two of the five commissioners (Fielder and Wellborn) were for the rate increase. If you believe Montanans deserve honesty and responsible stewardship at the PSC, please share this email with others who care about transparency and good governance. Together, we can shine a light on what's happening and demand better for Montana.

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