

How Turzai's going-away present to the gas industry will hurt Pa. for years to come |

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Marcellus shale gas-drilling site along PA Route 87, Lycoming County. Source: Creative Commons.

By Larry J. Schweiger

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Retiring House Speaker Mike Turzai, R-Allegheny, is about to grant the gas industry The most substantial “going-away-present” in the history of the Commonwealth.

The suburban Pittsburgh Republican, who isn't seeking re-election, [engineered the passage of a bill \(HB1100\)](#), formally [sponsored by Rep. Aaron D. Kaufer, R-Luzerne](#), that's a massive giveaway of untold tax dollars to undisclosed chemical, fertilizer, plastics, and petrochemical industries.

The [House granted its initial approval to the bill](#) in September 2019 by a vote of 139-46. The [Senate voted 39-11](#) on Feb. 4 to approve the measure, returning it to the House, [which voted 157-35 on that same day](#), to give its final approval to the bill.

The administration is still waiting for the bill to be sent over from the Senate, which is in recess for annual budget hearings. It would take two-thirds majorities in both Republican-controlled chambers to override the promised gubernatorial veto.

[The House GOP wants to 'Energize PA.' Environmentalists say 'no thanks'](#)

If it becomes law, this legislation will prop up a failing fracking industry that has experienced steep declines in the face of chronic oversupply. (Gas prices at the wellhead fell from a high of \$7.50 per thousand cubic feet to about \$2.50 since the “dash to gas” started in 2005.)

Turzai’s corporate welfare bill will cost taxpayers untold billions of dollars. The Pennsylvania Department of Revenue has estimated that the tax credit in the plan will cost approximately \$22 million in unpaid tax dollars for *each* purposely undisclosed plant covered under this giveaway for the next 30 years.

[Pa. Lawmakers send natural gas tax credit for Wolf, who’s promised veto](#)

Turzai announced his retirement even as he was shepherding the bill through the House. And while he hasn’t announced his future plans, it’s widely believed that the lame-duck speaker is headed for the gas industry, where he’d work to marshal support to override an expected gubernatorial veto.

The billions of dollars funneled into the private sector by the bill are billions in tax dollars that won’t be available for public schools or state-supported colleges and universities. It’s money that will not be available for social services, for vital infrastructure, or for environmental protections that are so desperately needed in Pittsburgh and surrounding communities.

Make no mistake about it, powerful lobbying forces have been operating behind the curtain, orchestrating our state government for their benefit and our ultimate downfall.

This second round of corporate welfare started last April 30, 2019 when Turzai and other Republicans held a press event in the shadow of the Shell petrochemical plant that Pennsylvania taxpayers subsidized by \$1.6 billion for about 300 to 600 permanent jobs. (Turzai has received more than \$1.5 million in political contributions from the fossil-fuel sector in recent years for his generosity with tax dollars.)

The tax credit bill, HB1100, is part of a larger, eight-bill package [collectively known as “Energize Pennsylvania,”](#) that would, if finally signed into law, [severely undermine existing inadequate environmental protections](#) and give the industry everything that it wants by:

- Stripping permitting authority away from the Department of Environmental Protection and handing critical environmental decision-making to a politically-appointed and unaccountable commission to run roughshod over communities and neighbors;
- Providing enormous tax credits of five-cents-per-gallon of natural gas purchased for certain petrochemicals or fertilizers;
- Authorizing the creation of 20 Keystone Energy Enhancement Zones where fossil fuel-based businesses will be exempt from state and local taxes. They will also be granted tax credits for 10 years. Local governments will pick up the tab for infrastructure to serve these projects, including polluting and noisy compressor stations, cryogenic facilities, and other gas-handling and consuming industries while exempted from paying taxes.

For years, Turzai and the Republicans did the industry's bidding by passing Act 13 to mandate natural gas drilling in every community and by slashing support for environmental programs by more than 40 percent from the general fund budget.

The demoralized staff at the state Department of Environmental Protection have been reduced by nearly 30 percent at a time when the workload has never been higher. As the 2020 elections approach, lawmakers are again picking winners and losers using taxpayer's money to subsidize their most significant political contributors to our long-term detriment.

January broke all planetary records by being the hottest on record. At a time when the climate crisis becomes more apparent, betting our future with tax subsidies on frack-gas is a big mistake.

[More than 10,000 unconventional gas wells](#) have been drilled in Pennsylvania with peak drilling occurring between 2010 and 2014. Water use per well averages 4.5 million gallons or 45 billion gallons of water used. Water in Pennsylvania is a public natural resource that, according to our Constitution, is "the common property to all the people."

Incumbent fracking industries are also increasingly struggling against the price-competitive insurgent clean energy industry.

They will try to win this by making substantial political contributions to politicians that do their bidding. Between 2007–2017 Pennsylvania lawmakers took an estimated \$68 million in contributions from the industry, and that does not include all the unrecorded favors that are not tracked. With the industry's large purse and political hold on the Legislature, there have been few prospects for rational change to advance clean energy to address the climate crisis.

There is only one earth, and our world is undergoing dramatic changes brought on by the climate crisis and other human-induced ecological disruptions. The world's top scientists studying these threats and the forces behind them have been warning us for decades to end the use of fossil fuels or face catastrophic consequences. Pennsylvania Republicans and far too many Democrats under the influence of corporate money are willfully blind to the truth.