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Texas Electric Grid Resilience is Priority.

Fix the problem

The 87th Legislature marks the fourth legislature (that's over six years) that a resilient electric grid has been one of my top legislative priorities. While we were successful in getting legislation out of the Texas Senate, the proposal repeatedly failed to make it through the process to become law. Legislators need look no further than the mirror for a scapegoat to place blame for our current situation.

Last session, in a report written to inform constituents about my proposed legislation, I said, "The very idea that a single event causing the loss of the electric grid could plunge the entire nation back into a time without electricity, cell phones, or the internet is so overpowering that it is easier to ignore the threat than to plan for it."

So, we did.

Through participation in a series of conference calls with the Texas Department of Emergency Management (TDEM) and the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) for situation reports, it was obvious that everybody is looking for someone to blame.

Who was it that failed to have a reliable grid in a time of need? Why are areas with significant cold weather not having the same issues? Who made the decision which neighborhoods to cut power to and which ones to leave with power? Why are rolling power outages that are supposed to last 15 to 30 minutes lasting hours or days?

ERCOT blames the weather or the generation power companies who make the decision to cut the power. The generation companies are just doing what they are told. Some wind turbines are to blame for being frozen. The sun failed to shine during peak need hours, so solar shares some blame. Weather froze key instrumentation equipment preventing coal and natural gas plants from operating.

There is plenty of blame to go around, but the responsibility for the issue lies squarely with the Legislature which has failed to require a plan to protect against just such an event as we have had. To their credit, Lt. Governor Patrick and Speaker Phelan both saw the need for the legislation last session, and each played their part in moving the critical legislation. Lt. Governor Patrick ensured my legislation went to the Senate Committee on Natural Resources to ensure a favorable vote to get the bill to the Senate Floor. Speaker Phelan, then chair of the House Committee on State Affairs, did his part and voted the bill out of his committee. Both are key players in ensuring the success of legislation this session.

Since this crisis began, Governor Greg Abbott has added the grid as an emergency item for the legislature to consider. Both Lt. Governor Patrick and Speaker Phelan have charged the appropriate committees to investigate the situation. I applaud their actions and stand ready to help in any way possible.

The real danger of a situation like this is that it causes a lot more to be said than done. However, nothing brings awareness of a situation like being a victim of it. You can watch the New Year's Day videos of people taking the "Polar Bear Plunge" into icy water, but you never know exactly how cold it is until you plunge in yourself.

For better or worse, the Texas Legislature has now taken the plunge.

At the end of the day, if we talk about the situation without solving it by ensuring the resiliency of the electric grid—no matter what the threat—the legislature will continue to bear the responsibility in crises such as these.

