An early Earth Day present:  
C-PACE passes the legislature!

On April 21, the day before Earth Day, we received a big holiday gift. C-PACE passed 3rd reading in the House, which means it is headed to the Governor’s desk! While we don’t have the Governor’s signature as of this writing, we are confident that SB 147, our Commercial Property-Assessed Capital Enhancements bill, will be the law of the land soon enough!

To paraphrase the current White House occupant, “This is a big freakin’ deal.”

Here’s a brief synopsis of this long, hard-fought campaign.

Years ago, we learned about a program that would remove the financial barriers that too often prevent property owners from adopting renewable energy and energy efficiency upgrades: Commercial Property Assessed Capital Enhancements (C-PACE).

This program was developed to give homeowners an innovative and affordable way to make their homes more energy efficient, comfortable, and secure. It allows property owners to secure upfront financing from local banks to make these upgrades, while paying back the cost of the upgrades as an assessment on their property tax bill over several years. Today, PACE is being used all across the country to empower business owners, non-profits, farmers, and ranchers to make upgrades that save them money and save the environment. Northern Plains set out to bring PACE to Montana.

We knew it would be an uphill battle to pass this important legislation, but we also knew that it was necessary to bring about the clean, affordable, and just energy future that we know is possible.

We started with a strong PACE bill in 2017 that didn’t gain the traction it deserved. We refined a new bill for 2019 which passed in the Senate and was one vote shy of passing its House committee. Cut to 2021 where we land this major legislative victory despite an extremely challenging session for conservation issues!

This win is a testament to the perseverance and tenacity of Northern Plains members. Over the years we’ve had hundreds of one-on-one meetings with stakeholders, we’ve written and edited more testimony than we can count, and we’ve made hundreds of phone calls to legislators. We’ve written countless LTE’s, met with editorial boards of statewide papers, and held numerous lobby days and rallies. We have worked nearly every day for 6 years to bring PACE to Montana, and, finally, we are on the cusp of making C-PACE the law of the land!

We couldn’t have accomplished this without the strong leadership and unwavering commitment of Senator Mary McNally (D – Billings), the bill’s sponsor. Thank you, Mary!

Thanks also to each and every one of you who played a part in this big win. C-PACE will help farmers, ranchers, and small business owners save money on their power bills. It will result in less energy consumed and, therefore, less pollution emitted. Because of your phone calls, your emails, your testimony, and your support, Montanans will have cleaner air, cleaner water, and a healthier climate!
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Testimony spotlight: What C-PACE means for small business owners

Northern Plains member and Livingston resident Dale Sexton provided testimony on C-PACE during one of the bill’s hearings, laying out what this bill means for small business owners like him:

“If I could utilize C-PACE and make my business more energy efficient, I would be able to use that savings to build my business and better meet the needs of my customers. I would also be supporting other local businesses that would install new windows, doors, lights and insulation.

NorthWestern’s billion-dollar boondoggle goes down in committee, but the fight isn’t over yet...

SB 379, NorthWestern’s stick it to ratepayers bill, was tabled by the House Energy Committee on April 21st by a resounding 11-1 margin. Almost 2,000 of you signed our petition against the bill, which was provided to committee members ahead of their vote. Hundreds of you made phone calls and sent emails. Many of you wrote letters to the editor, and some of you even testified at hearings. Together, all of you made a difference.

However, less than 48 hours later, NorthWestern pulled another trick from its sleeve. This billion dollar bailout was revived in the form of an amendment to an entirely different bill – HB 695. Just before sending this bulletin to the printer, we learned that the amendment passed out of the Senate Natural Resources Committee. The fight to defend captive energy customers from this monopoly energy corporation continues.

Throughout our 49-year history, Northern Plains members have been a firewall against the flames of corporate cronyism that try to torch the rights of everyday Montanans. We’re not about to back down now.

So stay tuned. Check our website and keep an eye on your email inbox for the latest developments. We won’t let NorthWestern and their legislative enablers get way with this!

Letter to the editor: NorthWestern’s play for Colstrip plant is BS

Northern Plains member Mary Fitzpatrick didn’t pull any punches with her Billings Gazette letter to the editor about SB 379:

“As Montanans have been battered by COVID-19, the loss of jobs and businesses, turmoil for schools and students, Northwestern Energy has recruited Sen. Steve Fitzpatrick (R-Great Falls) to drop a semi-load of cattle ordure on our heads.

Senate Bill 379 gives NorthWestern Energy everything the Public Service Commission and past legislatures have refused to grant. The company wants to purchase a larger share of the Colstrip 4 power plant, an aging jalopy that could be shut down at any time for very expensive repairs. This would be a foolish business decision, because NorthWestern would assume costs that include maintenance and
repair, decommissioning, cleanup of ash ponds and contaminated water and soil. The plant might shut down long before the $1.9 billion (PSC staff estimate) is recouped from sales.

But wait, what if NorthWestern could force customers to assume all this dangerous risk? The PSC stands between the ratepayers’ pocketbooks and the company’s greed, so SB 379 kneecaps the Commission by forbidding any oversight in the public interest, to the tune of $700 each year per customer.

Take that, Montana businesses and families. This bill removes any meaningful public protections against this monopoly utility with regard to the enormous costs of Colstrip ownership. The plant could be closed the day after purchase, killing jobs and sticking customers with decades of debt for a shuttered plant.”

Mary Fitzpatrick
Billings

Veto calls needed!

We have reached the last stage for a handful of bad bills we’ve been fighting all session. Despite our best efforts to defeat them in the House and Senate, the following bills are headed to the Governor’s desk:

• **HB 481** – Criminalize free speech and penalize farmers and ranchers
• **SB 211** – Disregard agricultural soils when planning subdivisions
• **HB 498** – Diminish citizen rights to make decisions about their communities
• **HB 527** – Make it harder for citizens to have a say in their community’s zoning laws

**TAKE ACTION!**

Call the Governor’s office at (406) 444-3111. You can also send the Governor an email here. Tell him to **VETO these bad bills!**

**NOTE:** If any of these bills affect you, your family, or your community directly and immediately, please consider briefly letting the Governor know how the bill could harm you and your livelihood.

Voter suppression bill becomes law, but legal challenges are already underway

We know that many of you have been closely following the developments around HB 176, the bad bill banning same-day voter registration, undermining a core pillar of our democracy. Unfortunately, this bill was signed into law earlier this week.

While we are disturbed that Montana has followed a dangerous voter suppression trend happening in statehouses across the country, we are encouraged to know that prominent groups have already filed lawsuits challenging this law. We will keep you updated as we learn more about these developments, and we commend all who are working so hard to preserve bedrock democratic principles.
Bad bills sent to the legislative graveyard

While it’s not polite to speak ill of the dead, perhaps we can silently dance on the graves of the following bad bill trio:

**SB 84** – A bill that would have politicized the Montana Consumer Counsel and risked the independence of the consumers’ voice in Montana’s energy decisions. TABLED by the House Energy, Telecommunications, and Federal Relations Committee!

**SB 323** – A bill that would have put politics above state agency expertise and allowed the legislature to impede the implementation of bedrock environmental laws like the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts. TABLED by the House Business and Labor Committee!

**HB 406** – A bill that would have undermined voting rights for rural and indigenous communities by banning the collection of ballots by Tribal governments and community organizations. FAILED second reading in the Senate.

Thanks to your hard work alongside our allies, these ill-informed ideas have been laid to rest!