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Editorial: Time to resolve ComEd case

As the Democratic mayor of Rockford from 1989 to 2001, Charles Box earned a reputation as a straight shooter who did his homework, reached out for a variety of views and worked well with business and labor.

The first African-American elected to run Rockford, Box proved to be a fiscally conservative administrator with good listening and analytical skills and a collaborative style of decision-making.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich on Monday nominated Box, 54, as chairman of the Illinois Commerce Commission. Box is not an expert in utilities, but the even-handedness and attention to detail he demonstrated as mayor make him a solid choice to head a regulatory panel that wrestles with complex and contentious issues.

So the governor appears to have gotten it right on the third try. He booted out his own first choice to run the ICC, Ed Hurley. His choice to succeed Hurley, Martin Cohen, was rejected by the Illinois Senate. Cohen is quite knowledgeable on utility issues, but the longtime head of the Citizens Utility Board could not be expected to be an impartial arbiter.

So we have choice No. 3: Charles Box.

This is, by the way, getting expensive. Blagojevich pushed Hurley to resign, then gave Hurley a consolation prize: a job in the administration at the same pay, \$113,836 a year, he earned as ICC chairman. After the Senate turned down Cohen, Blagojevich created a \$112,000-a-year job for him as the administration's first-ever consumer affairs director. So taxpayers are footing the bill, \$339,672 a year plus benefits, for ICC chairmen past, present and almost.

Box will have to get up to speed very quickly on the most pressing issue before the ICC: a controversial plan by ComEd to purchase electricity through an auction. A state law that cut ComEd's rates by 20 percent and froze them for a decade expires soon. The utility, which no longer generates its own power, has proposed a purchasing arrangement that it says will unleash competitive market forces to get the lowest possible price for its 3 million customers. Blagojevich and CUB oppose the plan. Under Cohen, CUB filed suit to block it.

The ComEd drama is coming to a climax. The ICC must decide its fate by Jan. 24. Regulators have been studying the proposal for nearly a year, and the file is crammed with thousands of pages of technical testimony and evidence. Box may have to pull a lot of all-nighters in the next few days.

One compelling summary he can follow is last month's 242-page report from Administrative Law Judge Michael Wallace, which recommended approval of the plan.

Wallace found it reasonable and workable and likely to meet ComEd's promise of tapping the power of competition to lock in a sure supply at reasonable prices.

The ICC and its new chairman have 11 days to act on ComEd's auction plan. Wallace's finding provides a sound basis for them to approve it.