

DRY HEAT
Less humid but very warm today with highs near 90; clear tonight.
Forecast, E16

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PUC has little choice in National Grid rate hike

The agency's chairman says when the utility is passing on increased costs for energy, which it buys from other companies, the commission's hands are tied.

BY PAUL EDWARD PARKER
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

One thing is all but certain: when the Public Utilities Commission meets this afternoon, it will approve National Grid's request to sharply increase the rates customers pay for electricity and natural gas.

Chairman Elia Germani said yesterday that, in cases where a utility is simply passing on increases it pays for energy, the PUC's hands are all

but tied. "I wish I had better news to give," he said.

National Grid is seeking a 21.7-percent increase in the rates it charges for electricity and a 10-percent increase in what it charges for natural gas. National Grid buys both of those from other companies and then distributes them to customers. The rate hike would cover the higher costs the company is paying. Electricity prices have risen sharply in

recent months as the price of oil — used to fire many power plants — has spiraled upward. Natural gas prices have also risen sharply.

The combined increases would raise the average utility bill for a typical home heated by gas by almost \$30 a month. The increase would be higher in winter months and lower in summer months.

National Grid, Rhode Island's dominant utility company, provides electricity to 477,000 customers in 38 communities and natural gas to about 245,000 customers in 33 com-

munities.

In a filing with the PUC, Attorney General Patrick C. Lynch opposed the rate hikes, but noted, "We recognize that ... National Grid is essentially seeking to pass through the effect of spiraling fuel costs to the ratepayers, not increase profits for its shareholders and bonuses for its officers and managers."

Germani said that, under state statute, the commission can only decide three questions in cases where

"I don't see any end to this



very soon ... the strain that's going to be on people. It's depressing, frankly."

ELIA GERMANI

Public Utilities Commission Chairman

SEE **RATES, B3**

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Your turn: What's your message for the PUC? To respond, go to projo.com

HE'S BACK ON THE JOB



CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY / SCOTT J. FERRELL

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., at the U.S. Capitol yesterday, with his wife, Victoria, and his son, Rep. Patrick Kennedy.

JOURNAL WIRE REPORTS

WASHINGTON — Massachusetts Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, battling a brain tumor, walked through a wall of applause and into the Senate yesterday and cast a dramatic vote on long-stalled Medicare legislation.

The 76-year-old walked into the chamber under his own power, accompanied by his son, Rep. Patrick Kennedy, and his niece, Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, along with several Democratic senators.

"I return to the Senate today to keep a promise to our senior citizens, and that's to

protect Medicare," the senator said in a statement issued by his office as the vote was unfolding.

Democrats have previously failed by a single vote to void a 10.6-percent pay cut for doctors treating Medicare patients. The cut automatically kicked in July 1 because of a funding formula that establishes lower reimbursement rates when Medicare spending levels exceed established targets.

Some doctors had threatened to stop taking new Medicare patients if the cuts remained in force.

But with Kennedy present yesterday, the measure easily passed on a procedural vote 69 to 30. The bill was eventually approved on a voice vote.

The House already has overwhelmingly approved the measure.

Kennedy was expected to be back in Boston today in time for his medical treatment.

Material from the Associated Press and Bloomberg News was used to compile this report.

Retirements help state cut 1,000 jobs

Governor Carcieri estimates savings for Rhode Island at "north of \$80 million." "I think it's a huge success," he says.

BY STEVE PEOPLES
JOURNAL STATE HOUSE BUREAU

PROVIDENCE — Nine months have passed since Governor Carcieri announced detailed plans to execute "one of the hardest things that has ever been done in state government."

The Republican governor vowed to cut 1,000 government jobs. The plan would save Rhode Island taxpayers \$100 million, he said.

Yesterday, Carcieri's office reported that it had indeed reduced

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Your turn: Should Governor Carcieri make further job cuts? Respond at projo.com

the state's work force by more than 1,000 people since mid October, relying heavily on a surge in retirements. The governor reduced his projected savings, however, to "north of \$80 million" for the budget year that began this month.

"I think it's a huge success. It's the first time in memory that we've been able to reduce the work force by this magnitude and achieve this level of sav-

SEE **JOBS, B6**

Iran missile tests ramp up tensions

Tehran says Israel is within range of its weapons but the U.S. defense chief tamps down talk of conflict.

JOURNAL WIRE REPORTS

PARIS — Iran's Revolutionary Guards test-fired nine missiles in war-game maneuvers yesterday, including at least one the government in Tehran described as having the range to reach Israel.

The tests drew sharp American criticism and came a day after the Iranians threatened to retaliate against Israel and the United States if attacked.

State-run media in Iran said the

missiles were long- and medium-range weapons, and included a Shahab-3, which Tehran maintains is able to hit targets up to 1,250 miles away from its firing position. Parts of western Iran are within 650 miles of Tel Aviv.

The tests, shown on Iranian television, coincided with increasingly tense exchanges with the West over Tehran's nuclear program, which it attacked.

SEE **IRAN, A7**

As salmonella spreads, mystery grows as to source of bacteria

In addition to some varieties of tomatoes, officials now warn consumers away from jalapeno peppers.

JOURNAL WIRE REPORTS

WASHINGTON — More than 1,000 people now have become ill from salmonella initially linked to raw tomatoes, a sobering milestone yesterday that makes this the worst food-borne outbreak in at least a decade. Adding to the confusion, the government is warning certain people to avoid types of hot peppers, too.

Certain raw tomatoes — red round, plum and Roma — remain a chief suspect and the

government stressed again yesterday that all consumers should avoid them unless they were harvested in areas cleared of suspicion.

But people at highest risk of severe illness from salmonella also should not eat raw jalapeno and serrano peppers, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention urged yesterday. The most vulnerable are the elderly, people with weak immune systems and infants.

CDC investigators became convinced that raw jalapenos caused at least some of the illnesses after studying two clusters of people who were stricken after eating at the

SEE **PEPPERS, A9**



KEEPING IT COOL

The Marc Cary Trio, with Cary on piano, Earl Travis on bass and Sameer Gupta on percussion, performs yesterday at the Providence Black Repertory Company as part of Providence SoundSession '08. More on SoundSession in Lifebeat Weekend, **E1**

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RUBEN W. PEREZ



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The Providence Journal SUMMERTIME FUND™



A total of **\$1,130** was donated last week. See the latest donations **B2**.

WIRETAP BILL APPROVED

The Senate gives final approval to a bill broadening the government's spy powers and providing legal immunity for phone companies that took part in past wiretapping programs, handing President Bush a significant victory in the Democratic-led Congress. **A7**

ATTACKED IN TURKEY

Gunmen storm a guard post at the U.S. consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, touching off a firefight that leaves three police officers and three attackers dead. **A2**



WHAT'S YOUR TOP PICK?

The Patriots lose the Super Bowl; the Celtics win the NBA finals; PC fires basketball coach Tim Welsh and hires Keno Davis. What's your pick for the biggest story in local sports so far this year? **C1**