

Sam Randazzo, Ohio's former top utilities regulator, charged with bribery, embezzlement crimes

**By Jeremy Pelzer, Andrew J. Tobias & Jake Zuckerman
cleveland.com**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A federal grand jury has indicted Sam Randazzo, the former chair of the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio, on 11 counts related to bribery and embezzlement, U.S. Attorney Kenneth Parker's office announced Monday.

The indictment states that Randazzo accepted a \$4.3 million bribe in exchange for helping FirstEnergy, an Akron-based electric utility, secure its policy priorities, including helping with House Bill 6, the 2019 energy law at the center of a federal bribery probe. FirstEnergy [admitted to bribing Randazzo in 2021](#), but he wasn't charged until now.

If convicted, Randazzo could face up to 20 years in prison.

The 74-year-old Columbus resident self-surrendered on Monday morning at U.S. District Court in Cincinnati, according to a release. He appeared in federal court that afternoon, cuffed at the wrists and ankles, before Chief Magistrate Judge Karen Litkovitz at Cincinnati's federal courthouse. He pleaded not guilty and was released on a bond of his own recognizance.

The [11 counts against Randazzo include](#): one count of conspiring to commit travel act bribery and honest services wire fraud, two counts of travel act bribery, two counts of honest services wire fraud, one count of wire fraud and five counts of making illegal monetary transactions, according to the release.

As chairman of the PUCO from April 2019 until he resigned in November 2020, [Randazzo reviewed requests](#) from gas and electric companies seeking to levy new costs on customers. He accepted \$4.3 million soon after meeting with then-FirstEnergy executives Chuck Jones and Mike Dowling in December 2018, as Randazzo was applying to become PUCO chair.

In November 2019, Randazzo pushed to [cancel a 2024 rate review case](#) that the company believed would hurt its bottom line by forcing it to reduce the rates it

charged customers, as well as open its books to regulators, which they saw as problematic.

Randazzo also [played a key role](#) in getting lawmakers, including Ohio Senate Finance Committee Chair Matt Dolan, to include language in the 2019 state budget [that loosened state limits](#) on FirstEnergy and other utilities' ability to make "significantly excessive" profits, according to the indictment.

Dolan, a Chagrin Falls Republican now running for the U.S. Senate, previously acknowledged speaking to Dowling, who convinced him of the need to place the amendment in the state budget. The Plain Dealer/cleveland.com reached out to Dolan on Monday for comment.

The indictment states that Randazzo routed the bribe money through his consulting business, Sustainability Funding Alliance of Ohio. He also used that business to funnel to himself at least \$1 million meant for Industrial Energy Users-Ohio, a consortium of large-scale energy buyers who he represented in PUCO cases as an attorney.

"Public officials – whether elected or appointed – are tasked with upholding the highest level of integrity in their duties and responsibilities. Such service to the public must be selfless, not selfish," the U.S. Attorney said in a statement. "Through the indictment unsealed today, we seek to hold Randazzo accountable for his alleged illegal activities."

Roger Sugarman, an attorney representing Randazzo in criminal and civil lawsuits, declined to comment Monday. Randazzo did not respond to questions posed by reporters.

Randazzo's arraignment on Monday advanced a stunning fall from grace from a once respected utility lawyer and lobbyist with notorious influence at the Statehouse. He is often credited with pushing for what would become state laws constricting the growth of wind, solar, and energy efficiency programs in Ohio. State lobbying records reflect years of lobbying work on behalf of the Ohio Gas Company, Vectren Energy and IEU. Now-state Sen. Shane Wilkin [once told Randazzo in an email](#) that "we already know you run the energy world." He was a [mainstay](#) at IEU's regular "Ohio Energy Management Conference."

Gov. Mike DeWine, who appointed Randazzo, [had dinner with Jones and Dowling the same night](#) as the latter pair's meeting with Randazzo. DeWine spokesman Dan Tierney said Monday that while the governor's office wasn't privy to the indictment and was still reviewing it, "the indictment alleges very serious acts. Our office has

full faith in the criminal justice system to adjudicate these serious allegations in an appropriate manner.”

Many of the emails and text messages referenced in the indictment to and from the former FirstEnergy executives and Randazzo have [previously been made public](#). However, the indictment’s details about his embezzlement charge are new, according to Dave DeVillers, Parker’s predecessor as U.S. attorney.

Randazzo resigned as PUCO chair in November 2020, days after [the FBI raided his Columbus townhouse](#). In the years that followed, prosecutors were silent about Randazzo, [leading to questions about why they were taking so long](#) to decide whether to file charges.

Ashley Brown, a former PUCO commissioner, said the delay has cost the state’s electricity customers, given that the PUCO has [paused its own investigations into the HB6 scandal](#) at Parker’s request to wait for the federal corruption investigation to wrap up.

In the meantime, electricity customers have continued to pay a fee contained in HB6 that [subsidizes a pair of coal plants](#) owned by FirstEnergy and several other utilities.

“It’s hard to imagine why he wasn’t indicted earlier,” said Brown, who also questioned why no current or former FirstEnergy officials have been charged so far.

Asked about the length of time it took for charges to be brought, DeVillers said, “They could have been negotiating with the defense attorney, they could have been talking to him and it fell apart. And then it could be they dug into this count [the embezzlement charge], which seems to be completely different, and needed to ferret that out to find out what that was all about.”

Randazzo is already a defendant in a civil lawsuit filed in 2021 by Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost. As part of that case, a Franklin County judge [ordered the seizure of up to \\$8 million](#) worth of Randazzo’s assets, though that decision is still being appealed.

Randazzo’s indictment comes several months after ex-Ohio House Speaker [Larry Householder was sentenced to 20 years in prison](#) for leading a \$60 million bribery scheme using FirstEnergy money to help pass House Bill 6, which included a \$1 billion-plus ratepayer bailout for two nuclear power plants then owned by a FirstEnergy subsidiary. Former Ohio Republican Party Chair Matt Borges [received 5](#)

years in prison for his role in the scandal; two others connected to the bribery scheme have pleaded guilty and are awaiting sentencing.

FirstEnergy officials previously admitted that Randazzo helped them to develop strategy and legal language for HB6.

After HB6 passed, emails made public last year [showed](#) Randazzo, as PUCO chair, worked behind the scenes to hinder attempts to fully repeal the law, and he only grudgingly called for state regulators to take limited action -- asking FirstEnergy to investigate itself over whether it misspent any customer money -- in response to negative press.

To date, no current or former FirstEnergy officials, have been charged in connection with the HB6 scandal or any of Randazzo's alleged crimes.

John Caniglia and Jake Zuckerman contributed to this story.