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As the President and CEO of the Dutchess County Regional Chamber of Commerce, I'm known as the "Think Local First" guy who is never shy about promoting our community's best interests and the competitiveness of local businesses.

Because I care so deeply about those businesses -- and because I recognize the importance of energy costs and service to their success -- I have spent a great deal of time reviewing the materials associated with Central Hudson's proposed merger with Canadian utility Fortis. On behalf of our membership, I met with Central Hudson officials, and I learned the facts about what is proposed in the deal -- and I strongly support it.

Fortis has contractually committed that nothing will change about our local utility and yet customers are expected to receive \$50 million in benefits. That is a win/win! Like the other utilities that the Fortis holding company owns, Central Hudson will act as a standalone entity. Central Hudson's employees, the headquarters, the name and the commitment to community will all remain -- and Fortis has committed to benefits such as a rate freeze that will last through July 2014, millions in economic development program funding, and to absorbing costs like those for restoring electricity after Superstorm Sandy. If this merger were not happening, customers would fund those items through their bills instead of the Fortis shareholders.

The State's Public Service Commission will continue to regulate Central Hudson, so concerns about foreign ownership are unfounded. I learned that Central Hudson is the second smallest utility in the country. After reading about Fortis' commitment, I am convinced that we will benefit by having both the resources of a larger operation *and* our same hometown utility to watch out for our interests with the same oversight from Albany.

In my opinion, Central Hudson has done right by its customers by agreeing to this new partnership with a well-respected company. Decisions like this are never easy to make but when deliberations are guided by doing what's right for those involved.

Central Hudson was a charter member of our Chamber when we formed in 1907, and the Chamber actually attracted their headquarters to Poughkeepsie in 1927 from Newburgh. Like most local businesses, we have had a long and positive relationship with Central Hudson, and I have no doubts that this relationship will continue to be a strong one not only the business community but for all of us here in the Hudson River Valley.

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