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# This man's expertise, enthusiasm have driven Maine's energy dialogue for decades

*Meg Haskell*

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Professor Richard Hill, the gravelly baritone voice of energy alternatives for two generations of Mainers, is an old man now. These days, the University of Maine engineering professor emeritus, energy consultant to industry and government, clean-wood technology innovator and longtime radio commentator is mostly dened up at home in Orono, under hospice care, with a diagnosis of metastatic prostate cancer.

But there's no dimming of the bright mind that's driven the dialogue about energy at the State House, in the research lab, on the radio waves and around the family woodstove for 70 years. Hill is as sharp as ever, still following issues of energy policy in the mainstream media and scientific progress in research journals.

And he's still contributing to the energy conversation, too; in a [recent letter to the Ellsworth American](#), Hill railed against the removal of hydroelectric dams on the lower reaches of the Penobscot River, reiterated his longstanding and controversial support for nuclear power and decried the development of wind-

driven power generation for its drop-in-the-bucket inadequacy.

“At age 97, I am free to say it,” he wrote in an unusually acerbic style. “Maine people are stupid when it comes to electric energy options.”

Hill’s outspoken opinions have won him admirers and critics throughout his career, including during his popular gig as a regular morning commentator on Maine Public Radio in the 1980s.

But it is his deep, data-driven expertise and his zealous spirit of inquiry that have kept him in the public eye, according to longtime friend and colleague Tom Gocze.

Gocze, 63, is the proprietor of [American SolarTechnics](#) in Searsport, a former columnist for the Bangor Daily News and the longtime host of the energy and technology call-in show “[Hot and Cold](#)” on radio station WVOM in Bangor. The three-hour weekly program began in 1989; until last September, Gocze’s co-host and frequent guest was Hill.

“He’s made energy technology easier for everyone to understand,” Gocze said of his friend and mentor. “And he’s the kind of fun uncle you’d like to have who would always encourage you to try all kinds of goofy experiments.”

## **Building expertise in energy**

Hill was born and raised in Schenectady, New York. His mother, a former schoolteacher, was a stay-at-home mom. His father, a professional engineer, built a career at Westinghouse, pioneering new refrigeration technologies.

“Whenever mother was away, Dad would take me into the shop,”

Hill said, where his earliest interest in physics and engineering was piqued and nurtured.

Hill graduated in 1941 from Syracuse University in New York with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering.

"I never earned another degree," he said.

Before the outbreak of World War II, Hill learned to fly small planes in a civilian program, anticipating a day when he might be called into military service.

"I still have my pilot's license," he said with pride, although he has not flown in many years.

After graduating from Syracuse, Hill took a job at General Electric, designing gas turbine superchargers that could boost small aircraft above the range of enemy fire. When the U.S. entered the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he said, "the government decided I was more valuable as an engineer than as a pilot."

Armed with the turbine technology, he travelled from one aircraft factory to the next, modifying B-29 bombers and other aircraft with the power to "lift them so high the Japanese couldn't reach them." It was a technology, he said, that helped the Allies win the war.

At the end of World War II, Hill decided to change career paths.

"I realized when I got to GE that my knowledge of thermodynamics was very poor," he said. He had studied on his own to become an expert, but "I was angry at Syracuse for not having prepared me better, and I felt that we had to do better in academe. So I decided to teach it."

Despite his lack of a graduate degree, Hill sent letters of interest to all the land-grant universities in New England.

“None of them even answered my letter, because I had no credentials,” he said — none, that is, except UMaine, where the post-war engineering faculty was acutely short-staffed.

Hill interviewed and was hired as an assistant professor of mechanical engineering.

Hill and his wife, Elizabeth, who met at GE, moved to Orono in 1946, just in time for their first child to be born a native Mainer. In 1949, they moved into a contemporary ranch home on College Avenue that Hill designed and built, and where, widowed now for nearly 20 years, he still lives. His five adult children are in close contact.

### **Deep roots, good friends and a legacy in Maine**

At UMaine, Hill taught courses in thermodynamics and other topics. He served briefly as the dean of the College of Engineering during the years after Russia launched Sputnik 1 and federal “space race” funding suddenly flowed to engineering programs across the country.

“I sprayed money around like there was no tomorrow,” he chuckled. “It was the most fun in my life.”

But perhaps his greatest accomplishment at UMaine was the creation and development of the [Department of Industrial Cooperation](#), which provides fee-for-service technical help, research support, project management and other resources to private sector businesses and organizations. Hill established the program in the 1960s and directed it until his retirement in 1992.

Jake Ward, now UMaine’s vice president of innovation and

economic development, came to work for Hill in 1991 and assumed leadership of the industrial cooperation program when Hill retired.

“It was Dick’s firm belief that the university had public assets — abilities, expertise, equipment — that should be used to support private industry,” Ward said recently. “He saw this as a kind of public service, like the Cooperative Extension for Maine companies.

“Dick contributed a lot of technical expertise to the department and really became the go-to guy for just about anything having to do with energy,” he added.

From consulting with the Bangor Hydro-Electric Co., a major provider of electrical service across the northern half of the state until its acquisition by Emera in 2010, to opposing the closure of the Maine Yankee nuclear plant near Wiscasset, to patenting his own, clean-burning “stick-wood furnace” and other inventions, Hill’s interest in efficient, sustainable energy technology spanned many sectors, Ward said.

In addition, Hill’s personal style has always been an asset to the university community, Ward said.

“He is a mountain of a man,” he said. “Brilliant, eloquent, wise, never arrogant.”

Hill’s patient explanations of complicated technical ideas made him an excellent teacher both in and out of the classroom, Ward said, bringing energy issues into mainstream conversation.

“I have always been so impressed with him,” he said.

Virginia Nees, a retired professor of English at the Orono campus,

praised her friend, colleague and former neighbor as “something of a renaissance man.” Hill’s eclectic interests and warm conversational style have earned him good friends across the campus, she said, and made him a popular guest at casual dinners and “interdisciplinary poker games.”

In addition, she noted, Hill has for many years rented a small apartment in his home to Chinese students and their families, cultivating enduring cross-cultural relationships in the process.

### **Living life, looking beyond**

During a recent visit at his home with the BDN, Hill launched into a heartfelt recitation of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s long, existential poem “[Renaissance](#),” which begins with the familiar lines, “All I could see from where I stood/ Was three long mountains and a wood;/ I turned and looked the other way,/ And saw three islands in a bay.” He knew the entire piece by heart, though he held a printed copy in his hand “just in case,” he said.

With the [recent announcement that Millay’s home](#) in Rockland will be restored and open as a museum, Hill said he’s contemplating donating a recording of the poem to the fundraising effort.

“My hope is that they’ll have a box where you can drop in a quarter and hear me recite it,” he quipped.

On a more serious note, Hill’s slow-growing prostate cancer, first diagnosed about 20 years ago, has now spread to his bladder. A hospice nurse visits twice per day. He keeps busy reading his scientific journals, writing to the Ellsworth American and enjoying regular visits, calls and emails from friends and family. He’s fascinated by space exploration, including the scientific data and

images of deep space beamed back to Earth from the [Hubble Space Telescope](#).

One thing he doesn't do is worry about dying, or what might happen afterward.

"Oh, I'm an atheist," he said when asked about the hereafter. "You really can't look at the pictures from the Hubble telescope and be anything except an atheist."

"I keep asking people, 'Tell me when I'm going to die,' but no one will tell me," Hill said cheerfully. "But at 97, I don't really much care."