

## FL House passes bill to bury power lines



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A bill that would require utilities to give long-range storm protection plans to the Florida Public Service Commission got the OK from the Florida House.

Without any debate and an overwhelming 110-3 vote, the bill passed through the House Wednesday. The bill passed 37-2 in the Senate last week.

The bill aims to create more plans to bring power lines underground, an expensive process that may or may not deliver significant improvement in the grid. It provides an opportunity for investor-owned utilities to build infrastructure and profit from the capital improvements — charges that will show up on customer utility bills.

According to the staff analysis by the House and Senate, these new bills create a new cost recovery charge, separate from a utility's base rates. An investor-owned utility can recover its costs to implement a 30-year storm protection plan, including a profit on capital projects.

Sen. José Javier Rodríguez spoke to House Democrats at their pre-session caucus meeting Tuesday, pointing out issues in the bill.

“There’s going to be less scrutiny on what they’re spending it on and it will be more expensive for consumers on this state,” said the Miami Democrat, who was one of two “no” votes in the Senate.

Rodríguez compared the bill to an action in 2011 when the state approved requests by FPL and another utility, Progress Energy, to add more than \$2 monthly to their customers’ bills for nuclear “cost recovery.” The “cost recovery” is for plants that may never be built including proposed new reactors at Turkey Point, 25 miles south of Miami near Homestead.

“This is basically the same thing,” he added.

House Democratic Reps. Anna Eskamani, Ben Diamond, D-St. Petersburg, and Cindy Polo, D-Miami Lakes, voted no after bringing up similar concerns in debate Tuesday night.

Eskamani, D-Orlando, asked a series of questions regarding the cost being passed off to customers and the utility companies that would benefit.

“I have serious concerns around any legislation that provides another avenue for investor-owned-utilities to increase rates,” she said.

Rep. Randy Fine, who sponsored the House bill, said constituents will appreciate the extra costs when their lights stay on, bringing up anecdotal examples of nursing homes that go black during hurricanes or restaurant workers who lose when the power goes out.

The Public Service Commission, which regulates utilities, already has a plan in place for storm hardening.

After the rash of Florida hurricanes in 2004 and 2005, the Public Service Commission imposed several new requirements on utility companies with respect to preparing for storms and strengthening infrastructure. The commission adopted a rule that requires each company to file storm hardening plans every three years.

“Do we want resiliency?” the Palm Bay Republican asked. “Do we want hardening? Do we want long-term plans?”

The Public Service Commission estimates that the implementation of the bill would require them to hire four more employees, which Fine said is a testament to an increased focus on transparency. In total, they would cost about \$261,269 in the next fiscal year.

Undergrounding just 4 percent of Florida Power and Light's overhead power lines would cost about \$577 million per year, according to a staff analysis of the bill. The state's largest utility's current undergrounding program costs more than \$632,000 per mile.

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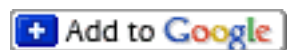
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