

# Electric rate-relief deal advances in House

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By Adriana Colindres  
GateHouse News Service  
Wed Jul 25, 2007, 09:37 PM CDT

SPRINGFIELD, Ill -

Voting along partisan lines, an Illinois House committee on Wednesday advanced a \$1 billion electric rate-relief deal negotiated by utility companies and state officials.

But Republicans who voted against the agreement said it isn't good enough.

"It's chump change," said Rep. David Leitch, R-Peoria. "I get to tell all these constituents whose bills have doubled and tripled and quadrupled that they get eight bucks a month in relief?"

The Ameren Illinois utilities, which serve much of downstate through AmerenCILCO, AmerenCIPS and AmerenIP, have said the rate-relief package would produce a minimum \$100 rebate this year for all residential customers. That translates to slightly more than \$8 a month.

The bulk of the relief is slated for 2007 and 2008, "so it gets in front of the election," Leitch said.

"It's just another example of what happens down here so the average ordinary person is going to take it in the ear once again," he added. "This is a purely politically driven resolution."

Electricity has been a hot-button subject this year in the General Assembly, and lawmakers have been hearing for months from constituents who were angry and surprised by dramatically higher power bills. Rates went up because of the expiration of a long-standing rate freeze, which was part of the state's 1997 electric deregulation law.

The proposed rate-relief package includes a combination of rebate checks, credits on power bills for the next few years, assistance programs for low-income customers and a new way for the state to buy electricity in the future.

It is spelled out in the latest version of Senate Bill 1592, sponsored by Rep. George Scully, D-Flossmoor. The deal targets residential customers, small- to medium-sized businesses and not-for-profit organizations that buy electricity from the Ameren Illinois utilities or Commonwealth Edison.

Scully told members of the House Electric Utility Oversight Committee that the measure has the effect of "decreasing the increase" on consumers' power bills.

House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago, said the electricity legislation is to come up for a House floor vote (Thursday).

"I am told that there are some Republicans that plan not to vote for the rate relief for electric ratepayers," said Madigan, who supports the deal. "And if there are Republicans, especially from the Ameren service territory, that are going to vote against rate relief, why, I welcome them to do it."

If the bill is to pass the House, it will need some Republican support to attract the required number of 71 yes votes. Seventy-one votes are necessary because the General Assembly has gone past its scheduled May 31 adjournment date. To become law, it must pass in the House and Senate and be signed by the governor.

The House committee vote was 5-3, with Democrats voting yes and most Republicans voting no. Rep. Jim Durkin, R-Western Springs, voted "present."

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