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ComEd's smart-grid plan passes Senate, but Gov. Pat Quinn reiterates vow to veto

High-tech ComEd plan promises long-term savings but would raise monthly bills \$3 for a decade

May 31, 2011 | By Ray Long and Monique Garcia, Tribune reporters

Commonwealth Edison's proposal to install a sophisticated power grid that customers would help pay for made it out of the General Assembly on Tuesday, but Gov. Pat Quinn said he still intends to veto it.

The legislation passed the Senate, 31-24, with four voting present, despite Quinn's threat and the heavy opposition of Attorney General Lisa Madigan and Illinois Commerce Commission Chairman Doug Scott. The trio of opponents called for more consumer protections and questioned whether ComEd's deal was too sweet.

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Quinn's "position has not changed" from days ago, when he vowed to veto the bill, Quinn spokesman Grant Klinzman said.

Sponsoring Sen. Mike Jacobs, D-East Moline, is taking a wait-and-see approach.

"I know what he says, but let's see what he does," Jacobs said. "When people move away from the intense lobbying of the attorney general, the governor and every state agency in Illinois, I think at some point people will look at it for what it is: It's progress."

ComEd estimated a typical customer who pays \$82 a month for electricity would have to spend an extra \$3 a month for 10 years. But the power company, a unit of Chicago-based Exelon Corp., maintained the energy efficiencies of so-called smart-grid technology could help consumers save money.

Under the plan, the utility would install new smart meters that could cut down on the practice of sending out estimated bills that many people get one month only to get hammered with an outsized catch-up bill later. Customers also could choose to lower their bills by running dishwashers and other appliances during off-peak periods, such as at night rather than on a hot Chicago summer afternoon.

During debate, Jacobs said upgrading the state's power grid is essential to helping "move Illinois forward" and creating jobs. But Sen. Jeff Schoenberg, D-Evanston, contended the bill represented an "inherently flawed approach to utility regulation."

Schoenberg charged the legislation would weaken the Illinois Commerce Commission's oversight, and he said that "unplugging the entire regulatory process" would fail to protect electric consumers and the rights of taxpayers.



The improved power grid, in theory, would allow the company to pinpoint outages more quickly. Under the current system, ComEd doesn't know when consumers' electricity goes off until they place a call and technicians look for and find a frayed wire or a downed pole.

ComEd would have to hit service and cost benchmarks by 2014, including proof that residential electricity bills rose no more than an average 2.5 percent over the first three years. That's an increase that would include not only the cost of smart grid but also other regular rate increases. Lawmakers would get to renew or dump the program in 2017, supplying what Jacobs called an extra check.

The proposal would lower ComEd's proposed profit margins, though not as much as some opponents want. An earlier version would have allowed ComEd to lock in profit margins above 10.6 percent under a review that would have taken as little as 45 days and provided no protection limits for consumers. The new proposal drops that profit margin to 10.25 percent and lengthens the review to 8 1/2 months, closer to the current, 11-month review process. Jacobs said the percentage allowed in the bill is smaller than in a rate hike the ICC approved in May.

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An advisory board overseen by the commerce commission would work with ComEd to roll out a smart-meter program to the utility's entire service area starting next year, applying lessons learned from a pilot program in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood and nine suburbs along the Eisenhower Expressway.

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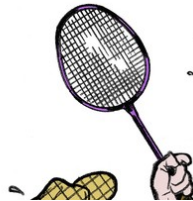
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