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State Lawmakers Pass Electric Rate Relief Bill

Bill Headed To Governor's Desk, But Some Say It Does Not Go Far Enough

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Mike Flannery
Reporting

(CBS) *SPRINGFIELD, Ill.* A bill that provides Illinois residents relief from sky-high rates for electricity was approved Thursday night by state lawmakers and is on its way to the governor's desk.

But, as CBS 2's Political Editor Mike Flannery reports, there are concerns that it does not go far enough to protect consumers from high power bills.

The rate relief bill would give a typical ComEd consumer credits worth about \$80 this year. Many in the general assembly fear that voters will be upset when they realize that the plan provides that in just 23 months electric rates return to their current high levels. But it sailed to easy passage.

The Senate and House both approved the rate relief deal by wide margins, but not before a vigorous debate in both chambers. Republicans generally complained it was not enough.

"You think this relief is going to make them happy?" yelled Rep. Bill Black (R-Danville). "You better look at your charts again."

For the average ComEd consumer, the bill would provide \$6.92 a month in 2007; \$3.46 in 2008; and 82 cents a month in 2009.

The bill will provide retroactive relief, meaning the average customer will see a \$50 credit on her September bill.

Downstate critics such as Black were not the only ones taking another look at this utility deal. Some representatives complained that the northern Illinois ComEd service area was getting an unfair small share, with ComEd and its corporate parent, Exelon, contributing 80 percent and downstate Ameren only 20 percent of the funds. But the actual rate relief cash was being split 50-50, a net transfer of nearly \$300 million from the Chicago area's 3.8 million ComEd customers to Ameren's 1.2 million customers downstate.

"I think if you represent a ComEd rate-payer, you have to ask yourself why is the rate-payer in ComEd having to subsidize the rest of the state," said Rep. Michael Tryon (R-Crystal Lake).

"Wow, are we a long way from a freeze. Isn't this something," said Rep. Roger Eddy (R-Hutsonville).

"Is this bill perfect? Absolutely not," said Sen. Gary Forby. "The people in my district and I know in some of your districts, can't wait any

longer.”

“It’s time to act. This bill does that,” said Rep. Lou Lang (D-Skokie). “Those who negotiated it should be thanked rather than vilified and I would strongly suggest your ‘aye’ vote.”

Senate President Emil Jones was feeling vindicated after the bill was sent to the governor's desk. His close personal and political ties to ComEd were criticized by those favoring an outright rate freeze, something Jones blocked.

“The rate freeze would not have solved the problem,” Jones said. “It would have been litigated in court and the people would have still been paying the high rates.”

The Senate vote Thursday night was 40-13. The measure passed in the House easily by a vote of 80-33.

Governor Rod Blagojevich told CBS 2 Thursday that he will likely sign the bill after reading its finer points.

Lawmakers are busy in Springfield, trying to wrap up their marathon overtime session and Jones also said four legislative leaders met privately Thursday without the governor to discuss a consensus budget.

Democrats in the state Senate are moving their own budget, one that increases aid to education by about \$900 million – about \$200 million for Chicago Public Schools. It relies on four new casinos in the Chicago area, including a land-based casino in downtown Chicago.

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