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# Deadlocked Pa. panel rejects Peco proposal for COVID-19 bill relief for low-income customers

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A deadlocked Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission on Thursday rejected [Peco's proposal](#) to provide temporary COVID-19 relief for low-income customers, including a onetime \$50 bill credit for 113,000 households.

The PUC, on a 2-2 vote, [rejected an expedited request from the Philadelphia utility](#) to provide “timely and temporary relief to low-income customers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.” The Peco proposal would have provided the onetime \$50 bill credit, steered \$1.5 million in unspent relief funds to provide electric fans or replace old window air-conditioners, and relaxed some enrollment requirements for its low-income assistance program.

But two Republican commissioners, John F. Coleman Jr.

and Ralph Yanora, sided with a PUC staff recommendation that Peco's proposal, submitted on June 26, was insufficiently documented, including its impact on other customers who would eventually be asked to pay for the costs in universal service charges built into Peco's rates.

"Peco really has not provided sufficient data supporting documentation or the justification to support these proposals, which could cost residential rate payers an additional \$9.4 million in universal service charges," Coleman said. "Commission decisions must be supported by substantial evidence and the standard is not been met here."

Coleman said the pandemic has also hurt customers who do not qualify for low-income programs. "The proposals before us today are limited to certain customers based upon income levels, but the cost will be borne by all residential customers," he said.

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The Republicans voted against a proposal from David M. Sweet, the commission's vice chair, and Gladys Brown Dutrieuille, the commission's chair, to accept Peco's proposal.

Sweet said the Peco proposal would provide relief particularly in Philadelphia, where 20% of the workforce has filed for unemployment compensation at some point since the pandemic hit in March. “In light of this economic devastation, Peco’s proposal is necessary to provide immediate protection to its most vulnerable customers during this unprecedented time,” Sweet said.

Brown sought to place the matter on an upcoming PUC agenda, but Coleman said that “unless or until Peco provides additional documentation, I think the matter is concluded.”

Peco on Thursday called its proposal “a timely, robust effort” and expressed disappointment at the outcome. “However, we will continue to work with the PUC to implement a plan that provides immediate support to our most vulnerable customers in light of the economic impact this pandemic is expected to have on our customers and communities,” Mayra Bergman, Peco’s vice president for communication, said in a statement.

The PUC impasse was the second time in the last month that the PUC has deadlocked on party-line votes over coronavirus relief measures. In July, the [PUC could not agree](#) on a plan to lift a COVID-inspired moratorium on service shutoffs, leaving in place an order preventing utilities from terminating service to nonpaying customers.

Overt party-line splits are unusual for the PUC, which typically resolves many philosophical disagreements through consensus.

But the commission has had a vacancy since April when Democrat Andrew G. Place resigned to take a job out of state. By law, the five-member commission can have no more than three members from any political party. The resignation of a Democrat has left the commission divided equally on party lines.

Commission members are nominated by the governor and approved by the Pennsylvania Senate.