WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATURE

2024 REGULAR SESSION

Introduced

Senate Bill 798

By Senator Jeffries

[Introduced February 15, 2024; referred  
to the Committee on Economic Development]

A BILL to amend and reenact §24-1-1 and §24-2H-8, of the Code of West Virginia, 1931, as amended; and to amend and reenact §31-15A-9 of said code; all relating to the Distressed Utilities Account and to utilities being required to hold at least 1/8 capital reserve to be eligible to request additional state funding.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of West Virginia:

Chapter 24. Public Service Commission.

article 1. general provisions.

§24-1-1. Legislative purpose and policy; plan for internal reorganization; promulgation of plan as rule; cooperation with Joint Committee on Government and Finance.

(a) It is the purpose and policy of the Legislature in enacting this chapter to confer upon the Public Service Commission of this state the authority and duty to enforce and regulate the practices, services, and rates of public utilities in order to:

(1) Ensure fair and prompt regulation of public utilities in the interest of the using and consuming public;

(2) Provide the availability of adequate, economical, and reliable utility services throughout the state;

(3) Encourage the well-planned development of utility resources in a manner consistent with state needs and in ways consistent with the productive use of the states energy resources, such as coal;

(4) Ensure that rates and charges for utility services are just, reasonable, applied without unjust discrimination or preference, applied in a manner consistent with the purposes and policies set forth in article two-a of this chapter and based primarily on the costs of providing these services;

(5) Encourage energy conservation and the effective and efficient management of regulated utility enterprises; and

(6) Encourage removal of artificial barriers to rail carrier service, stimulate competition, stimulate the free flow of goods and passengers throughout the state and promote the expansion of the tourism industry, thereby improving the economic condition of the state.

(b) The Legislature creates the Public Service Commission to exercise the legislative powers delegated to it. The Public Service Commission is charged with the responsibility for appraising and balancing the interests of current and future utility service customers, the general interests of the states economy and the interests of the utilities subject to its jurisdiction in its deliberations and decisions.

(c) The Legislature directs the Public Service Commission to identify, explore and consider the potential benefits or risks associated with emerging and state-of-the-art concepts in utility management, rate design and conservation. The commission may conduct inquiries and hold hearings regarding such concepts in order to provide utilities subject to its jurisdiction and other interested persons the opportunity to comment and shall report to the Governor and the Legislature regarding its findings and policies to each of these areas not later than the first day of the regular session of the Legislature in the year 1985, and every two years thereafter.

(d) It is legislative policy to ensure that the Legislature and the general public become better informed regarding the regulation of public utilities in this state and the conduct of the business of the Public Service Commission. To aid in the achievement of this policy, the Public Service Commission annually shall present to the Joint Committee on Government and Finance, created by §4-3-1 *et seq.* of this code, or a subcommittee designated by the joint committee, a management summary report which describes in a concise manner:

(1) The major activities of the commission for the year especially as such activities relate to the implementation of the provisions of this chapter;

(2) Important policy decisions reached and initiatives undertaken during the year;

(3) The current balance of supply and demand for natural gas and electric utility services in the state and forecast of the probable balance for the next ~~ten~~ 10 years; and

(4) Other information considered by the commission to be important including recommendations for statutory reform and the reasons for such recommendations.

(e) In addition to any other studies and reports required to be conducted and made by the Public Service Commission pursuant to any other provision of this section, the commission shall study and initially report to the Legislature no later than the first day of the regular session of the Legislature in the year 1980 upon:

(1) The extent to which natural gas wells or wells heretofore supplying gas utilities in this state have been capped off or shut in; the number of such wells; their probable extent of future production and the reasons given and any justification for capping off or shutting in such wells; the reasons, if any, why persons engaged or heretofore engaged in the development of gas wells in this state or the Appalachian areas have been discouraged from drilling, developing or selling the production of such wells; and whether there are fixed policies by any utility or group of utilities to avoid the purchase of natural gas produced in the Appalachian region of the United States generally and in West Virginia specifically.

(2) The extent of the export and import of natural gas utility supplies in West Virginia.

(3) The cumulative effect of the practices mentioned in §24-1-1(e)(1) and §24-1-1(e)(2) upon rates theretofore and hereafter charged gas utility customers in West Virginia. In carrying out the provisions of this section the commission shall have jurisdiction over such persons, whether public utilities or not, as may be in the opinion of the commission necessary to the exercise of its mandate and may compel attendance before it, take testimony under oath and compel the production of papers or other documents. Upon reasonable request by the commission, all other state agencies shall cooperate with the commission in carrying out the provisions and requirements of this subsection.

(f) No later than the first day of the regular session of the Legislature in the year 1980, the Public Service Commission shall submit to the Legislature a plan for internal reorganization which plan shall specifically address the following:

(1) A division within the Public Service Commission which shall include the office of the commissioners, the hearing examiners and such support staff as may be necessary to carry out the functions of decision-making and general supervision of the commission, which functions shall not include advocacy in cases before the commission;

(2) The creation of a division which shall act as an advocate for the position of and in the interest of all customers;

(3) The means and procedures by which the division to be created pursuant to the provisions of §24-1-1(f)(2) shall protect the interests of each class of customers and the means by which the commission will assure that such division will be financially and departmentally independent of the division created by §24-1-1(f)(1);

(4) The creation of a division within the Public Service Commission which shall assume the duties and responsibilities now charged to the commissioners with regard to motor carriers which division shall exist separately from those divisions set out in §24-1-1(f)(1) and §24-1-1(f)(2) and which shall relieve the commissioners of all except minimal administrative responsibilities as to motor carriers and which plan shall provide for a hearing procedure to relieve the commissioners from hearing motor carrier cases;

(5) Which members of the staff of the Public Service Commission shall be exempted from the salary schedules or pay plan adopted by the Civil Service Commission and identify such staff members by job classification or designation, together with the salary or salary ranges for each such job classification or designation;

(6) The manner in which the commission will strengthen its knowledge and independent capacity to analyze key conditions and trends in the industries it regulates extending from general industry analysis and supply-demand forecasting to continuing and more thorough scrutiny of the capacity planning, construction management, operating performance, and financial condition of the major companies within these industries.

Such plan shall be based on the concept that each of the divisions mentioned in §24-1-1(f)(1), §24-1-1(f)(2), and §24-1-1(f)(4) shall exist independently of the others and the plan shall discourage ex parte communications between them by such means as the commission shall direct, including, but not limited to, separate clerical and professional staffing for each division. Further, the Public Service Commission is directed to incorporate within the said plan to the fullest extent possible the recommendations presented to the subcommittee on the Public Service Commission of the Joint Committee on Government and Finance in a final report dated February 1979, and entitled A Plan for Regulatory Reform and Management Improvement.

The commission shall, before January 5, 1980, adopt said plan by order, which order shall promulgate the same as a rule of the commission to be effective upon the date specified in said order, which date shall be no later than December 31, 1980. Certified copies of such order and rule shall be filed on the first day of the 1980 regular session of the Legislature, by the chairman of the commission with the clerk of each house of the Legislature, the Governor, and the Secretary of State. The chairman of the commission shall also file with the office of the Secretary of State the receipt of the clerk of each house and of the Governor, which receipt shall evidence compliance with this section.

Upon the filing of a certified copy of such order and rule, the clerk of each house of the Legislature shall report the same to their respective houses and the presiding officer thereof shall refer the same to appropriate standing committee or committees.

Within the limits of funds appropriated therefor, the rule of the Public Service Commission shall be effective upon the date specified in the order of the commission promulgating it unless an alternative plan be adopted by general law or unless the rule is disapproved by a concurrent resolution of the Legislature adopted prior to adjournment sine die of the regular session of the Legislature to be held in the year 1980: *Provided*, That if such rule is approved in part and disapproved in part by a concurrent resolution of the Legislature adopted prior to such adjournment, such rule shall be effective to the extent and only to the extent that the same is approved by such concurrent resolution.

The rules promulgated and made effective pursuant to this section shall be effective notwithstanding any other provisions of this code for the promulgation of rules or regulations.

(g) The Public Service Commission is hereby directed to cooperate with the Joint Committee on Government and Finance of the Legislature in its review, examination and study of the administrative operations and enforcement record of the Railroad Safety Division of the Public Service Commission and any similar studies.

(h) (1) The Legislature hereby finds that rates for natural gas charged to customers of all classes have risen dramatically in recent years to the extent that such increases have adversely affected all customer classes. The Legislature further finds that it must take action necessary to mitigate the adverse consequences of these dramatic rate increases.

(2) The Legislature further finds that the practices of natural gas utilities in purchasing high-priced gas supplies, in purchasing gas supplies from out-of-state sources when West Virginia possesses abundant natural gas, and in securing supplies, directly or indirectly, by contractual agreements including take-or-pay provisions, indefinite price escalators or most-favored nation clauses have contributed to the dramatic increase in natural gas prices. It is therefore the policy of the Legislature to discourage such purchasing practices in order to protect all customer classes.

(3) The Legislature further finds that it is in the best interests of the citizens of West Virginia to encourage the transportation of natural gas in intrastate commerce by interstate or intrastate pipelines or by local distribution companies in order to provide competition in the natural gas industry and in order to provide natural gas to consumers at the lowest possible price.

(i) The Legislature further finds that transactions between utilities and affiliates are a contributing factor to the increase in natural gas and electricity prices and tend to confuse consideration of a proper rate of return calculation. The Legislature therefore finds that it is imperative that the Public Service Commission have the opportunity to properly study the issue of proper rate of return for lengthy periods of time and to limit the return of a utility to a proper level when compared to return or profit that affiliates earn on transactions with sister utilities.

(j) The Legislature further finds that water and sewer utilities that are political subdivisions of the state providing separate or combined services and having at least four thousand five hundred customers and annual gross revenues of $3 million or more are most fairly and effectively regulated by the local governing body with respect to rates, borrowing and capital projects. Therefore, notwithstanding any contrary provisions of this section, the jurisdiction of the Public Service Commission over water and sewer utilities that are political subdivisions of the state is limited to that granted specifically in this code.

(k) The Legislature further finds that an adequate cash working capital fund is essential to allow water and sewer utilities that are political subdivisions of the state to deliver continuous and compliant service. Therefore, these utilities shall maintain a working capital reserve in an amount of no less than one eighth of actual annual operation and maintenance expense. This reserve shall be separate and distinct from and in addition to any repair and replacement fund that may be required by bond covenants. Further, any public utility that requests any funding from the State shall maintain a working capital reserve in an amount of no less than one eighth of actual annual operation and maintenance expense, prior to requesting or being considered to receive such additional funding.

(1) Any public utility that requests such funding from the State shall establish an initial set of rates, approved by the Public Service Commission that will allow the accumulation of the net additional funds over current cash balances necessary to achieve the working capital reserve for a period of 24 months. Nothing in this section shall require the Public Service Commission to approve any rates for locally rate regulated utilities.

(2) The term "funding" in this section includes any loans, grants, bonds, or any other monies administered or approved by a state agency.

(3) Funding for failing or distressed utilities may only be granted under this Article upon an order from the Public Service Commission, establishing that the utility is failing or distressed, pursuant to §24-2H-5 of this code, and a capable proximate utility, pursuant to §24-2H-5 of this code, can adequately acquire such failing or distressed utility. The Public Service Commission’s order shall further require the failing or distressed utility to request such funding from the Distressed Utilities Account established pursuant to §31-15A-9(i) of this code. Such funding shall only be applied at the direction of the capable proximate utility identified for acquisition and may only be used by the failing or distressed utility for debt repayment, capital improvements, or a combination of both.

ARTICLE 2H. POWER OF COMMISSION TO ORDER MEASURES UP TO AND INCLUDING THE ACQUISITION OF DISTRESSED AND FAILING WATER AND WASTEWATER UTILITIES.

§24-2H-8. Commission approval of operating agreement, acquisition price; rates for distressed and failing utilities; improvement plan; debt obligations; cost recovery.

(a) After an order has been entered pursuant to §24-2H-7 of this code, the distressed utility and another acquiring public utility shall file a petition with the commission under §24-2-12 of this code to approve the necessary operating agreement if such alternative is directed by the commission. After an order has been entered pursuant to §24-2H-7 of this code, the failing utility and acquiring utility shall file a petition with the commission under §24-2-12 of this code, to approve the purchase price of the acquisition. Where the parties are unable to agree on an acquisition price, the filing may request that an evidentiary hearing be held so that the commission may determine the acquisition price and any other issues related to the acquisition. The acquisition price must, at a minimum, satisfy all outstanding loans, tax obligations, required grant repayment, liens, and indebtedness owed by the failing utility or the acquiring utility must agree to assume the indebtednesses if legally permitted. The acquiring utility shall consult with the lenders or lienholders regarding payment in full or the assumption, to the extent legally permissible, of any outstanding obligations of the failing utility.

(b) The parties to an acquisition may propose to the commission other methods of determining the acquisition price.

(c) As part of the proceeding, the acquiring utility may propose to the commission that it be permitted for a reasonable period of time after the date of acquisition, to charge and collect rates from the customers of the failing utility pursuant to a separate tariff, which may be higher or lower than the existing tariff of the distressed or failing utility, or may allow a surcharge on both the acquired and existing customers. A separate tariff or rate filing must be made by the acquiring utility before the commission will consider any increase in rates or allow a surcharge to be placed on the acquiring utility’s acquired or existing ratepayers.

(d) As part of this proceeding, the acquiring utility shall submit to the commission for approval a plan, including a timetable for bringing the failing utility into compliance with applicable statutory and regulatory standards, including, but not limited to, plans for regionalization. The acquiring utility shall have previously obtained the approval of the plan from the Department of Environmental Protection and the Bureau for Public Health, as applicable, and those agencies are directed to use their full discretion in working towards long-term solutions that will support compliance. The failing utility shall cooperate with the acquiring utility in negotiating agreements with state and federal agencies, including, but not limited to, negotiation of hold harmless agreements, consent orders or enforcement moratoria during any period of remediation. In addition, the failing utility shall cooperate with the acquiring utility in obtaining the consent of the failing utility’s and the acquiring utility’s bondholder(s) to the acquisition. The acquiring utility must present to the commission as part of its financing plan, documentation on how the failing utility’s indebtedness will be paid or assumed.

(e) ~~A nonprofit acquiring public~~ The distressed or failing utility may seek grant funding from the Distressed Utilities Account established pursuant to §31-15A-9(i) of this code to repair, maintain, and replace the distressed water and wastewater utilities facilities as needed. The reasonably and prudently incurred costs of the acquiring utility shall be recoverable in rates as provided in §24-2H-9 of this code.

(f) If the distressed or failing utility is a public service district, then the commission shall make a recommendation to the respective county commission(s) with regard to the acquisition of distressed or failing utilities as provided in §16-13A-2(a)(2) of this code. If the distressed or failing utility is a municipal corporation, then the commission shall make a recommendation to the respective municipal council with regard to the acquisition of distressed or failing utilities as provided in §8-12-17 of this code.

(g) The capable proximate utility may propose one or more of the cost recovery methods or incentives set forth in §24-2H-9 of this code as part of its petition for approval from the commission.

Chapter 31. Corporations.

ARTICLE 15. WEST VIRGINIA INFRASTRUCTURE AND JOBS DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL.

§31-15A-9. Infrastructure fund; deposits in fund; disbursements to provide loans, loan guarantees, grants and other assistance; loans, loan guarantees, grants and other assistance shall be subject to assistance agreements; West Virginia Infrastructure Lottery Revenue Debt Service Fund; use of funds for projects.

(a) The Water Development Authority shall create and establish a special revolving fund of moneys made available by appropriation, grant, contribution, or loan to be known as the West Virginia Infrastructure Fund. This fund shall be governed, administered and accounted for by the directors, officers and managerial staff of the Water Development Authority as a special purpose account separate and distinct from any other moneys, funds or funds owned and managed by the Water Development Authority. The infrastructure fund shall consist of sub-accounts, as deemed necessary by the council or the Water Development Authority, for the deposit of: (1) Infrastructure revenues; (2) any appropriations, grants, gifts, contributions, loan proceeds, or other revenues received by the infrastructure fund from any source, public or private; (3) amounts received as payments on any loans made by the Water Development Authority to pay for the cost of a project or infrastructure project; (4) insurance proceeds payable to the Water Development Authority or the infrastructure fund in connection with any infrastructure project or project; (5) all income earned on moneys held in the infrastructure fund; (6) all funds deposited in accordance with §31-15B-4 of this code; and (7) all proceeds derived from the sale of bonds issued pursuant to §31-15B-1 *et seq.* of this code.

Any money collected pursuant to this section shall be paid into the West Virginia infrastructure fund by the state agent or entity charged with the collection of the same, credited to the infrastructure fund, and used only for purposes set forth in this article or §31-15B-1 *et seq.* of this code.

Amounts in the infrastructure fund shall be segregated and administered by the Water Development Authority separate and apart from its other assets and programs. Amounts in the infrastructure fund may not be transferred to any other fund or account or used, other than indirectly, for the purposes of any other program of the Water Development Authority, except that the Water Development Authority may use funds in the infrastructure fund to reimburse itself for any administrative costs incurred by it and approved by the council in connection with any loan, loan guarantee, grant or other funding assistance made by the Water Development Authority pursuant to this article.

(b) Notwithstanding any provision of this code to the contrary, amounts in the infrastructure fund shall be deposited by the Water Development Authority in one or more banking institutions: *Provided,* That any moneys so deposited shall be deposited in a banking institution located in this state. The banking institution shall be selected by the Water Development Authority by competitive bid. Pending the disbursement of any money from the infrastructure fund as authorized under this section, the Water Development Authority shall invest and reinvest the moneys subject to the limitations set forth in §31-18-1 *et seq.* of this code.

(c) To further accomplish the purposes and intent of this article and §31-15B-1 *et seq.* of this code, the Water Development Authority may pledge infrastructure revenues and from time to time establish one or more restricted accounts within the infrastructure fund for the purpose of providing funds to guarantee loans for infrastructure projects or projects: *Provided,* That for any fiscal year the Water Development Authority may not deposit into the restricted accounts more than 20 percent of the aggregate amount of infrastructure revenues deposited into the infrastructure fund during the fiscal year. No loan guarantee shall be made pursuant to this article unless recourse under the loan guarantee is limited solely to amounts in the restricted account or accounts. No person shall have any recourse to any restricted accounts established pursuant to this subsection other than those persons to whom the loan guarantee or guarantees have been made.

(d) Each loan, loan guarantee, grant or other assistance made or provided by the Water Development Authority shall be evidenced by a loan, loan guarantee, grant or assistance agreement between the Water Development Authority and the project sponsor to which the loan, loan guarantee, grant or assistance shall be made or provided, which agreement shall include, without limitation and to the extent applicable, the following provisions:

(1) The estimated cost of the infrastructure project or project, the amount of the loan, loan guarantee or grant or the nature of the assistance, and in the case of a loan or loan guarantee, the terms of repayment and the security therefor, if any;

(2) The specific purposes for which the loan or grant proceed shall be expended or the benefits to accrue from the loan guarantee or other assistance, and the conditions and procedure for disbursing loan or grant proceeds;

(3) The duties and obligations imposed regarding the acquisition, construction, improvement, or operation of the project or infrastructure project; and

(4) The agreement of the governmental agency to comply with all applicable federal and state laws, and all rules and regulations issued or imposed by the Water Development Authority or other state, federal, or local bodies regarding the acquisition, construction, improvement, or operation of the infrastructure project or project and granting the Water Development Authority the right to appoint a receiver for the project or infrastructure if the project sponsor should default on any terms of the agreement.

(e) Any resolution of the Water Development Authority approving loan, loan guarantee, grant, or other assistance shall include a finding and determination that the requirements of this section have been met.

(f) The interest rate on any loan to governmental, quasi-governmental, or not-for-profit project sponsors for projects made pursuant to this article shall not exceed three percent per annum. Due to the limited availability of funds available for loans for projects, it is the public policy of this state to prioritize funding needs to first meet the needs of governmental, quasi- governmental and not-for-profit project sponsors and to require that loans made to for-profit entities shall bear interest at the current market rates. Therefore, no loan may be made by the council to a for-profit entity at an interest rate which is less than the current market rate at the time of the loan agreement.

(g) The Water Development Authority shall cause an annual audit to be made by an independent certified public accountant of its books, accounts, and records, with respect to the receipts, disbursements, contracts, leases, assignments, loans, grants, and all other matters relating to the financial operation of the infrastructure fund, including the operating of any sub-account within the infrastructure fund. The person performing such audit shall furnish copies of the audit report to the Commissioner of Finance and Administration, where they shall be placed on file and made available for inspection by the general public. The person performing such audit shall also furnish copies of the audit report to the Legislature’s Joint Committee on Government and Finance.

(h) There is hereby created in the Water Development Authority a separate, special account which shall be designated and known as the West Virginia Infrastructure Lottery Revenue Debt Service Fund, into which shall be deposited annually for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2011, and each fiscal year thereafter, the first $6 million transferred pursuant to §29-22-18d of this code and any other funds provided therefor: *Provided*, That such deposits and transfers are not subject to the reservations of funds or requirements for distributions of funds established by §31-15A-10 and §31-15A-11 of this code. Moneys in the West Virginia Infrastructure Lottery Revenue Debt Service Fund shall be used to pay debt service on bonds or notes issued by the Water Development Authority for watershed compliance projects as provided in §31-15A-17b, and to the extent not needed to pay debt service, for the design or construction of improvements for watershed compliance projects. Moneys in the West Virginia Infrastructure Lottery Revenue Debt Service Fund not expended at the close of the fiscal year do not lapse or revert to the General Fund but are carried forward to the next fiscal year.

(i) The Water Development Authority shall establish a separate restricted account within the infrastructure fund to be expended for the repair and improvement of failing water and wastewater systems by ~~nonprofit public utilities~~ the distressed or failing utility from grants approved by the council and supported by recommendations from the Public Service Commission in accordance with the plan developed under §24-2H-1 *et seq.* of this code. The restricted account shall be known as the Distressed Utilities Account. Annually, the council may request the Water Development Authority to transfer from the uncommitted loan balances for each year a total amount not to exceed $5 million to the restricted account to fund the grants approved by the council during that fiscal year. Notwithstanding the provisions of §31-15A-10(b) of this code, the council may approve grants from this account for up to 100 percent of the cost of failing utility repairs, replacements and improvements and such grant along with other grants awarded by the council may exceed 50 percent of the total project cost: *Provided,* That at no time may the balance of the restricted account exceed $5 million.

NOTE: The purpose of this bill is to describe Distressed Utilities Accounts and requiring utilities to hold at least 1/8 capital reserve to be eligible to request additional state funding.

Strike-throughs indicate language that would be stricken from a heading or the present law and underscoring indicates new language that would be added.