

Brown looks to utilities panel to continue clean-energy projects

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Gov. Jerry Brown and clean-energy advocates are looking to the Public Utilities Commission to fund projects following the Legislature's rejection late Friday of bills that would have extended a long-standing fee on utility bills known as the public goods charge.

Brown, a proponent of extending the fee, said Tuesday that the PUC "has the ability to provide incentives for the kind of programs that the public goods charge would provide."

"That's an avenue that will be pursued, I feel quite confident, by the Public Utilities Commission," said Brown, whose appointees hold three of the five seats on the commission.

Brown had touted extension of the surcharge – set to expire at the end of this year – as a means to achieve his job-creation and clean-energy goals. The 1.5 percent tax on electricity bills raises \$400 million a year used for energy-efficiency and renewable-energy research and projects.

"We think California should continue to be a clean-energy leader, and the public goods charge has been a key program in establishing California's leadership in this area," said Bernadette Del Chiaro, director of clean-energy programs for Environment California.

"It's important to keep it rolling."

Her group is among those asking the PUC to levy a new fee to fund some of the projects that have been covered by the public goods charge. But a fee authorized by the commission could not be spent in exactly the same way, Del Chiaro said, because funds would have to stay within the PUC and could not be transferred to other state agencies. That could hamper the research element of the program, which is largely conducted by the University of California and the state's Energy Commission.

PUC spokesman Andrew Kotch said it's too soon to say whether the commission will levy a fee to replace the public goods charge.

"It's early in the game right now," he said. "We are discussing possible actions right now but it's too early to comment any further."

V. John White, a veteran environmental lobbyist who heads a coalition of environmental groups called the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies, said going through the PUC "is not satisfactory."

"The problem with the PUC route is you're unlikely to get the program similar to the ones proposed. Certainly the PUC raising rates to give money to the Energy Commission stretches credulity to me," he said. "People like that route because you don't have to involve the Legislature."

Dan Kalb, California policy manager for the Union of Concerned Scientists, said efforts are under way to rewrite the public goods charge bill so it would require approval of a simple majority in the Legislature, instead of two-thirds.

"We support whatever it takes to make it happen," Kalb said.

"Another option is for the governor to call a special session on the economy and jobs, and to continue negotiations where he left off," Kalb said. "This was just a setback last Friday, not the end game."

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