

RETA bill makes it through House, heads to Senate

By Staci Matlock | The New Mexican

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A freshman lawmaker from Doña Ana County narrowly marshaled his first bill through the House after an unexpected hour-long debate over its subject, the Renewable Energy Transmission Authority (RETA).

House Bill 242, sponsored by Rep. Bill McCamley, D-Mesilla Park, heads to the Senate after Monday's 35-31 vote.

To McCamley, the bill is simple: It gives RETA until 2017 to identify "lanes" for renewable energy transmission lines and lets the agency use eminent domain when necessary without first seeking approval from the state Public Regulation Commission.

"Without the lanes, we don't get the lines," McCamley said after the vote. "Without the lines we can't develop more utility-scale wind and solar in the state. Publication after publication has lauded the fact that New Mexico could be a leader in large-scale wind and solar."

Electric utility lines are near capacity and can't carry more electricity for future needs, utility companies say. New transmission lines are needed for both conventional and renewable energy sources.

The Legislature established RETA in 2007 to identify and find financing for renewable energy transmission and storage projects. It has faced criticism for its slow pace even as advocates defend the agency's efforts. It is one of eight such electric authorities in the nation and the only one that focuses on renewable energy.

In 2010, RETA issued \$50 million in revenue bonds to support development of the High Lonesome Mesa Wind Farm near Willard, N.M. It also is working on a project to develop a 900-mile transmission line from Northeastern New Mexico to California, according to the RETA website. It has actually completed 52 miles of transmission line from Willard to Belen.

HB242 had been approved overwhelmingly in two bipartisan committees before coming to the House for a vote. McCamley said that given the heavy debate in the House, he's not sure what to expect in the Senate.

The bill had two aspects that seemed to raise Republican hackles — ongoing funding and the eminent domain provisions.

HB242 creates an ongoing RETA development fund. During the last five years, RETA's operations were funded for three years with state general fund money and for two years by private companies,

including Goldman Sachs. HB 243 requests \$1.5 million from the general fund for use by RETA. HB2 has a special appropriation of \$250,000 for RETA's operating costs and HB113 also requests \$393,200 to pay for administrative and operating costs.

"I thought RETA was supposed to be self-sustaining by now," said Rep. Candace Ezzell, R-Roswell.

Ezell, among other Republicans, also took issue with the eminent domain provisions. RETA already has the ability to lay claim to property with a reasonable payment to the landowner, if negotiations fail.

But under current law, the PRC would first have to approve the transmission project and find it didn't hurt electric service reliability before RETA could condemn property for a transmission line right-of-way. HB242 removes the PRC oversight. The bill allows RETA to "take" property if negotiations with property owners have failed, as long as the transmission project meets federal standards.

McCamley acknowledged that although a lot of people want renewable energy, many people don't want transmission lines in their backyard. "Ranchers, tribes, the military, none of them want it," McCamley said. "There's not a piece of land in this state that someone doesn't want to protect. But without those lanes, we don't get the lines."

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