

Your natural gas bill could go up if DeWine signs bill for pipeline upgrades

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Ohioans could pay more on their natural gas bills if Gov. Mike DeWine signs a bill that passed swiftly through the GOP-controlled state Legislature.

Last-minute changes to House Bill 201 would allow natural gas companies to charge customers for more infrastructure upgrades, extensions and planning costs, including proposed projects that might never be built.

"In other words, this will not be the bridge to nowhere. This will be the pipe to nowhere," Sen. Kent Smith, D-Euclid, said.

But Sen. Rob McColley, R-Napoleon, contended that the change is needed to bring new jobs to Ohio. "If we are competing across state lines for economic development projects, that in many cases are going to bring hundreds if not thousands of jobs for the state of Ohio, we need to remain competitive for those projects," he said.

DeWine seems to agree. "We have a great natural advantage with natural gas in Ohio," the Republican governor told reporters Friday while not expressly saying whether he'd sign the bill. "Making sure it is in the right spots and gets to the right spots is vitally important."

How much would gas customers pay?

The charges would be limited to \$1.50 per month for customers, but utilities could collect those fees for years to come. Currently, the state's four largest gas companies charge less than the \$1.50 monthly cap, according to Ohio's Legislative Budget Office.

How much could that cost Ohio's 3.7 million gas customers? It's hard to say without knowing what projects will be built in the future.

Sen. Niraj Antani, R-Miamisburg, called the expanded fees a "massive tax increase on consumers." Ohio's Legislative Budget Office estimated the new charges "are likely to be minimal."

The Ohio Consumers' Counsel and Ohio Manufacturers' Association oppose the new charges, saying they will hurt customers and the state's economy.

"As Ohioans have less money to spend on other goods and services (such as going to a restaurant, buying clothing, etc.), Ohio's economy will suffer, not prosper. And consumers will suffer," Ohio Consumers' Counsel Maureen Willis wrote in a letter to lawmakers.

A previous veto

DeWine previously vetoed a proposal that would have allowed electric companies to charge for planning, developing and building utility infrastructure for big projects. That money would have come from the All Ohio Future Fund, money earmarked for megaprojects, rather than customers' bills.

At the time, DeWine said the change would put too much power in utilities' hands. Now, DeWine says access to utilities is important as the state attracts companies to sites. "If you look to the future, this is one of the ingredients that we have to have for us to grow," DeWine said.

Lt. Gov. Jon Husted also emphasized the importance of having sites ready to go. "We lose deals when utilities are not in place because we can't act fast enough to get them there," he said.

As initially drafted, House Bill 201 would also prevent Ohio from following California's lead and mandating emission standards. Last year, California adopted rules that would require new cars, pickups and SUVs to be electric or hydrogen-powered by 2035, the Associated Press reported.

But that idea was never on the table here. "It's not going to happen in Ohio," DeWine said.