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 **TRICITY RECORD**

How can utilities, state regulators spark economic development in New Mexico?

PRC special meeting focuses on grid interconnection

By Hannah Grover NM Political Report

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Electrical utilities. pixabay



When companies look at setting up shop in New Mexico, one of the things they look for is access to reliable electricity that's capable of meeting their needs.

"When businesses evaluate potential locations for a new investment, or if they're considering an expansion in the state, access to utility infrastructure isn't just a consideration, it's a requirement," Chad Matheson, senior vice president of the Albuquerque Regional Economic Alliance, said during a New Mexico Public Regulation Commission meeting on Thursday.

The three investor-owned electric utilities in New Mexico presented information about their grid interconnection processes to state regulators during the meeting. Those utilities include the Public Service Company of New Mexico (PNM), El Paso Electric (EPE) and Southwestern Public Service Company (SPS), which is a subsidiary of Xcel Energy.

"We're trying to figure out the commission's role, and what the commission could do to help ensure economic development is possible in New Mexico," Commission Chairman Pat O'Connell said.

The process of getting businesses connected to electricity is a key component of economic development.

"Grid interconnection delays have a real chilling effect on business in the state," Austin Rueschhoff with the New Mexico Large Customers Group said. "Our members are seeing significant delays in bringing new load onto the system, which hinders their business's ability to flourish and further contribute to New Mexico's economy."

One way PNM, the state's largest utility, is working to improve economic development is through investing in anchor substations in areas where there's demonstrated interest. An example of one of these areas is the Mesa del Sol area in Albuquerque. This allowed companies like Ebon Solar to move into the area.

In addition to presenting on current practices, the utilities provided information to the PRC about some changes that could make it easier or faster for companies – especially those with greater demands for electricity – to connect to their grids.

Some of the things they mentioned included streamlining or speeding up the regulatory approval processes with methods such as integrated resource plans and certificates of convenience and necessity, which are essentially approvals to own or operate generation assets.

The utilities also spoke about challenges outside of the PRC's control, such as supply chain constraints. It can be hard for utilities to access some of the necessary materials and equipment in a timely fashion because of global supply chains.

These challenges come as the utilities are managing an evolving grid and an increasing demand for electrification.

Omar Gallegos, vice president of energy delivery for EPE, said utilities know they are in "new times" and are dealing with increases in the number of requests for electricity they're receiving from businesses.

"It's not something that you know the industry has been used to, and we're all going through this together," he said.

The electric utilities are anticipating growing demand as AI and data centers become more prevalent. Additionally, utilities are facing increased demands amid an oil and gas boom in the Permian Basin.

Missi Currier, president and CEO of the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association, said increased demand for electricity has strained the grid nationwide.

“It is especially acute in Lea and Eddy counties in New Mexico, as oil and gas companies move to electrify equipment in order to reduce emissions,” she said. “There is an immediate need for four times the electricity currently available so that these emissions reduction efforts can continue.”

The PRC is looking for ways it can support economic development efforts.

“I don’t want this agency to be an excuse as to why we don’t have the levels of economic development,” Commissioner Gabriel Aguilera said.

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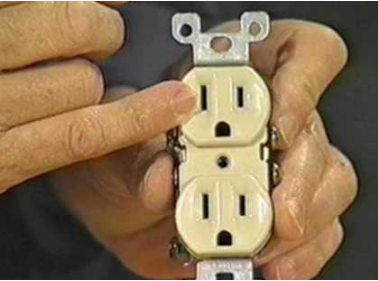


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