

## Mich. Senate makes last-minute effort to change rules for coal plants

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State environmental groups are urging Michigan House lawmakers to reject a Senate bill that would make it easier for electric utilities to develop coal plants.

In a vote of 21-16 yesterday the Senate-approved [legislation](#) that would forbid the [Michigan Department of Environmental Quality](#) from considering whether a proposed power plant is needed and whether there are alternative ways of meeting the state's energy needs.

The bill is tied to measures that would [ban](#) state agencies from creating regulations that are more strict than federal regulations, and [privatize](#) some aspects of permit review.

The move comes as the Legislature is scheduled to go into winter break and as the DEQ prepares to announce decisions on long-pending and controversial bids to build new power plants — a 600megawatt petroleum coke fired plant by [Wolverine Power Cooperative](#) in [Rogers City](#) and an 800 megawatt coal-fired power plant planned by [Consumers Energy](#) for its Karn-Weadock generating complex at the mouth of the Saginaw River near [Essexville](#).

A spokeswoman for the House Democrats, Abby Rubley, said that it is unclear whether the House will take up this legislation before it adjourns for winter break until Jan. 13.

House Speaker [Andy Dillon](#) (D-Redford Township) has been an [outspoken advocate](#) of the proposed new power plants. In July he told The Saginaw News that by taking time to review air permit applications by coal plants the Department of Environmental Quality creates a perception that Michigan is not a friendly place to do business.

The DEQ's authority to consider whether new power plants are necessary comes from an [executive order](#) issued by the governor in February.

In the order Granholm stated that because coal-fired power plants are major emitters of pollution, and need for energy in Michigan is declining, the DEQ should consider whether coal plants are the best way to meet the state's power needs.

“If the Department determines that a feasible and prudent alternative to the construction of a new proposed coal-fired electricity generating plant exists consistent with the reasonable requirements of the public health, safety, and welfare that would better protect the air, water, and other natural resources of this state than the proposed coal-fired electricity generating plant, the Department shall not issue a permit to install.”

Granholt directed the [Michigan Public Service Commission](#) to conduct reviews of whether new plants are needed and whether there are better alternatives.

This additional criteria led to another round of public hearings on the pending coal plant permit applications.

In September, the Michigan Public Service Commission announced that neither of the proposed plants are needed, and the state [Clean Water Action](#), the [Sierra Club](#), the [Ecology Center](#) and the [Michigan Environmental Council](#) all urged the House to reject the Senate's bill.

"The Senate is heaving a 'hail Mary' pass to the House on behalf of the state's big utilities and it smacks of dangerous desperation," said Anne Woiwode, the Sierra Club's Michigan director.

Mike Shriberg, policy director for the Ecology Center, pointed out that residents of the western Upper Peninsula have been hit with a 33-percent rate increase because of the costs associated with construction of a new coal power plant in Wisconsin.

"On the same day that Northern Michigan residents got socked with a huge utility increase, the state Senate saw it wise to pass a bill that will stick even more of us with higher energy costs by forcing us to pay billions of dollars for a new coal plant," Shriberg stated. "We urge the state House to let common sense to prevail and immediately reject the Senate's dangerous and costly plan."

Woiwode said in a phone interview that the bill may change before it is picked up by the House and that lawyers are now reviewing the language of the Senate bill to determine whether it is legal.