

Bill on Colstrip purchase voted down in Montana House

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By: MTN News *-Reported by Jonathon Ambarian/MTN News*

(HELENA) The Montana House has voted down a bill aimed at encouraging NorthWestern Energy to buy a larger interest in the Colstrip 4 power plant — just a day after it passed a preliminary vote.

On Monday, Senate Bill 331 passed its first vote 62-38. But in the final vote Tuesday, it failed 37 to 60.

25 representatives who had supported SB 331 on the first vote — including 21 Republicans and 4 Democrats — voted no on the second vote. Two Democrats switched their votes from no to yes.

The bill's sponsors, Republican Sens. Tom Richmond of Billings and Duane Ankney of Colstrip, said they were disappointed in the House's decision to vote down the bill.

"It's been used as a football from the House to the Senate and back again, never really being rejected on its true merits, but on the political," said Ankney. "And that's unfortunate, but that's the way it is."

The bill was defeated on the same day House Bill 658, Montana's Medicaid expansion bill, passed its final vote in the Senate. Several Republican senators, including Ankney and Richmond, had said they were withholding their votes on the Medicaid bill in hopes of convincing lawmakers and Gov. Steve Bullock to back SB 331.

SB 331 originally guaranteed NorthWestern, the state's largest electric utility, could charge its customers up to \$75 million over 10 years for new expenditures at the Colstrip plant. But it had been substantially amended in the House, including giving the Montana Public Service Commission greater oversight over the costs.

"It certainly wasn't the same bill I sent them," Richmond said. "Frankly I'm not sure I would have voted for that bill either by the time they got done with it."

But supporters of SB 331 say they're optimistic at least some of the bill's provisions may continue.

"I think that the subject is so important to the state of Montana that there could be pieces of it that may survive," said Senate Majority Leader Fred Thomas, a Republican from Stevensville. "We'll have to see what people want to do."

Since SB 331 missed a transmittal deadline, it would require a two-thirds vote to bring it back. However, some parts of the bill could be amended into other bills. Thomas said there are still several bills going through the process whose titles are general enough that aspects of SB 331 could be added to them.