

LONG ISLAND

LIPA board to hold first virtual meeting as it complies with coronavirus rule



LIPA's board meeting will be livestreamed, and board members will be patched in virtually, a spokesman said Monday. Credit: Newsday / John Paraskevas

By Mark Harrington

mark.harrington@newsday.com [@MHarringtonNews](#)

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The LIPA board of trustees will hold its first virtual board meeting Friday as the authority readies a program that would allow hundreds of thousands of Long Islanders to switch to an outside company for their energy supply.

LIPA's board meeting will be livestreamed, and board members will be patched in virtually, a spokesman said Monday, in line with a state mandate to forestall large gatherings due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Trustees will not be required to vote this week on the alternative power supplier program, known as community choice aggregation, which comes at the urging of several Long Island towns that are seeking cheaper, greener choices for energy. Trustees are expected to vote on it May 20, after a public comment period May 4. If approved, the programs can begin June 1.

Southampton, Brookhaven and Hempstead towns have for months been exploring the prospects of community choice, which is already available to utility customers in the rest of the state. It allows third-party companies to pool the electric demand of customers within municipalities to seek less costly supply contracts for power than utilities may be getting. The program, approved by the state Public Service Commission in 2016, is also available for natural gas customers. LIPA, which is not under PSC jurisdiction, was not required to implement the program but has moved to advance it at the urging of the towns.

Southampton, which has a goal of 100% green energy, welcomed LIPA's efforts in pushing through a rule change, Councilman John Bouvier said, noting that the town hopes to move quickly.

"We're ready to go," he said, saying the town and its contractor, Joule Assets, need to hammer out billing and other logistical matters and hold more hearings so that residents and businesses are fully aware of the plan.

"We've been working under the assumption we'll be able to do this" before year's end, he said. "I'm feeling pretty confident we'll be able to lower the cost."

Power consumption for Southampton's 40,000 electric customers has "flatlined" or declined in recent years, Bouvier noted, also helping lower customer costs and reduce costly peak prices.

Brookhaven Town Supervisor Edward Romaine, who has been critical of LIPA for delays approving community choice, said the town expects to implement both electric and natural gas programs. He believes the town could benefit from lower fuel commodity prices right now.

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"I wish community choice was up and operating right now," Romaine said. "The price of a barrel of oil has dropped so much that on the open market the price of energy is going to go very low."

Brookhaven had been scheduled to vote on naming a program administrator last week, but has delayed the vote because of the coronavirus disruptions, Romaine said, adding he expects the vote in April.

More than 180,000 households in Brookhaven would be switched to the programs, which could offer electric supply for 5 percent to 10 percent below conventional utilities' prices. Customers could opt out at any time.

Romaine said he believes the town could begin to implement the programs later this year.

Town of Hempstead Supervisor Don Clavin in a statement said the town "has been conducting due diligence in researching implementation of this cost saving measure for our residents for both electric and gas in a comprehensive package."

LIPA's proposal for community choice won't impact authority finances because any decrease in revenue from lost customers would be made up by a corresponding lowering of its energy expenses, according to the filing. LIPA customers who switch to a community choice program still pay a delivery charge to LIPA for the cost of bringing the energy to their homes or businesses. The towns have been asking that the utility keep the community choice supply charge on a single PSEG bill, town officials said.

LIPA chief Tom Falcone indicated in December that the authority was willing to move forward with community choice, but indicated that such programs don't always live up to the promise of cheaper energy.

"If they [towns] can get a better deal somewhere else, they can do it," Falcone said. "But it's very difficult to get a better deal."

By Mark Harrington

mark.harrington@newsday.com [@MHarringtonNews](#)

Mark Harrington, a Newsday reporter since 1999, covers energy, wineries, Indian affairs and fisheries.

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