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AL bill could lower utility rates

Ralph Chapoco
ALABAMA REFLECTOR

Supporters of a bill that would end popular elections to the state's utility regulation board argue it could help bring down Alabama's high power bills.

"I think that if we move toward an appointed Public Service Commission, we have an opportunity to reset things and at least have an opportunity to get our rates down," said Rep. Chip Brown, R-Hollinger's Island, the sponsor of HB 392, which would end elections to the Alabama Public Service Commission, after a House committee approved the bill last week.

But public utility experts said evidence that appointing utility regulators leads to lower costs is, at best, mixed. Electricity rates are tied to other factors independent of how utility regulation boards are formed.

"In general, utility bills reflect decades of utility investment decisions and PSC decisions about the return on equity," said Ari Peskoe, director of the Electricity Law Initiative at the Harvard Law School Environmental and Energy Law Program, in a statement.

Peskoe said that regulators approve the rates that public utilities charge customers from operations and investments.

"Utility rates vary because utilities have different operational costs and make different investment decisions, in part based on geography and a host of factors beyond the utility's control," he said.

Brown's bill was removed from consideration shortly before a scheduled vote on Feb. 12. Brown continued to defend the bill later that day.

"This is all about trying to get our rates down," he said in a press conference. "And it is about a Public Service Commission that has been failing the state of Alabama for over 100 years. We have not had open rate hearings for decades, so this is an effort to try and bring the Public Service Commission out of the dark and into the light."

What drives costs

House Speaker Nathaniel Ledbetter, R-Rainsville, told reporters last week that he supported Brown's bill.

"Alabama is one only one of 10 states that doesn't appoint the Public Service Commission members," he said. "Of the states in the United States, those 10

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BUILDING CHANGE



Small houses could alter future of disaster response

Gary Cosby Jr.
Tuscaloosa News | USA TODAY NETWORK

Andrew Blake, a construction site supervisor for Habitat for Humanity Tuscaloosa, works on a small house he designed and built to use in disaster relief situations on Jan. 30. Blake uses a compound miter saw to make cuts for a piece he is fabricating for the roof.

GARY COSBY JR./TUSCALOOSA NEWS

"The finished version of this prototype is going to be a two-bedroom house. You can start small and expand. That is how we build in Jamaica. A lot of this is Jamaican inspired."

Andrew Blake
Habitat for Humanity Tuscaloosa build site supervisor

Andrew Blake grew up watching hurricanes and earthquakes destroy the lives of people in his native Jamaica. Little could be done to thwart the forces of nature, but the problems nature created never left his mind. ● Blake, now a build site supervisor for Habitat for Humanity Tuscaloosa, has a big idea using small houses that he believes can change the face of disaster relief. The 133-square-foot octagonally shaped houses provide a complete living space with a kitchenette, bathroom with shower, toilet and sink, and a space for sleeping in a loft and on a retractable sofa bed. The unit can house four people. ● Blake first began thinking about how to get better housing or people following the July 3, 2024, hurricane that devastated Jamaica.

"From Hurricane Beryl, two years ago, we went to Jamaica to do some recovery work after the island was hit by the hurricane. We did roof work, but a second storm tore up everything. I wanted to get camper units. You put a camper in someone's yard and they can repair the roof. The camper has a bathroom and a kitchen so people could live in it while making repairs," Blake said, explaining the genesis of his idea.

Blake said the camper idea proved to be too expensive so he began applying his mind to the problem and came up with the idea of the tiny houses.

"I said, you know, I will build a camper-type unit they can put in their yard and they can use it for something else when they are done with it. They can house their family temporarily, they can cook, and go to the

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Trader Joe's named top grocery store in U.S.

Jennifer Lindahl
Montgomery Advertiser
USA TODAY NETWORK

Could a California grocery store be Alabama's new favorite place to shop?

Trader Joe's, known for its Hawaiian-shirted staff, quirky tote bags and cult-favorite snacks, has just been named America's top-rated grocery store, sur-

passing longtime favorite Publix, according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index.

It's not just the novelty that's winning fans. The ACSI, which surveys 30,000 Americans each year, measures customer satisfaction across major chains and smaller stores nationwide. Trader Joe's earned an 86-point score, up two from 2025, thanks to a combina-

tion of affordable store-brand products, friendly service and an offbeat shopping experience.

How many Trader Joe's locations are in Alabama?

Trader Joe's operates 600 stores across 43 states. With three locations now in Alabama, the chain is proving

that even Southern shoppers are embracing its quirky charm. Here's where you can shop at Trader Joe's in Alabama:

- Birmingham: 205 Summit Blvd, Suite 100
- Hoover: 1769 Montgomery Hwy
- Huntsville: 1100 Mid City Dr NW

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