

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 544 (Laird) – As Amended July 14, 2025

Policy Committee: Utilities and Energy

Vote: 18 - 0

Urgency: No

State Mandated Local Program: No

Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill directs the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) to adopt an expedited review and approval process applicable to qualifying railroad crossing applications before the CPUC.

More specifically, this bill directs the CPUC to adopt an expedited review and approval process for exempt railroad crossing applications at a voting meeting after considering input from stakeholders and other public comments. The bill authorizes the CPUC, thereafter, upon initiating a ratesetting proceeding, to determine whether the proceeding is an exempt railroad crossing application, and if so, to issue a proposed resolution with an expedited review and approval process, subject to public notice and other requirements.

The bill defines an “exempt railroad crossing application” as “a railroad application...with clear public benefit, without valid protest objecting, in whole or in part, to the application, and where the commission determines there is no need for an evidentiary hearing or a more comprehensive review.”

FISCAL EFFECT:

Minor, absorbable costs to the CPUC.

COMMENTS:

In 2015, following several instances of inappropriate and potentially inappropriate communication between CPUC commissioners and staff, on the one hand, and representatives of regulated entities, on the other, the Legislature increased restrictions and requirements applicable to CPUC proceedings. Specifically, Senate Bill 215 (Leno), Chapter 807, Statutes of 2016, requires, among other things, every CPUC adjudication or rate-setting proceeding start with a pre-hearing conference and a scoping memo setting forth the issues that will be considered in the proceeding. Coincident with this requirement, CPUC’s approval of uncontested rail crossings has gone from, in most cases, less than six months, to usually taking more than six months. This includes several extreme cases the CPUC has taken over a year, or multiple years, to approve.

The author reports being made aware of this issue by the CPUC and intends this bill to create “a more efficient review process for uncontested rail crossing applications, minimizing delays that could jeopardize time-sensitive funding,” which, the author asserts, will increase efficiency “without compromising the review procedure for more complex or contested applications.”

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