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Groups allege racism in refusal to bury power lines

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PROVIDENCE – National Grid has buried power lines in Middletown, Smithfield and Westerly, but the utility has long resisted doing the same across India Point Park in Providence. Proponents of moving the wires un-

derground in the waterfront park say the disparate treatment comes down to demographics. In the places where National Grid has buried lines, the resident populations are mostly white and poverty levels are low. In Providence, minorities outnumber white people and a quarter of the population is poor. "It's pretty dramatic. They had no problem doing it in these other places,"

said David Riley, co-chairman of Friends of India Point Park. The charge of discrimination is just the latest accusation lobbed at National Grid by Riley's group and others who have been fighting for the burial project for the past 19 years and believe it would remove an eyesore, enhance property values, and boost economic development in the capital city.

They see an opening now that Pennsylvania-based PPL Corporation is seeking permission from Rhode Island regulators to buy National Grid's operations in Rhode Island. The allegation about unfair treatment is made in a filing with the Division of Public Utilities and Carriers, which will decide whether
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the \$5.3-billion deal can go ahead.

In addition to Friends of India Point Park and other neighborhood groups, the parties represented in the filing include Narragansett Brewing Company, which operates a brewery opposite the park, and Grant Festivals, which organizes the annual Rhode Island Seafood Festival in the park.

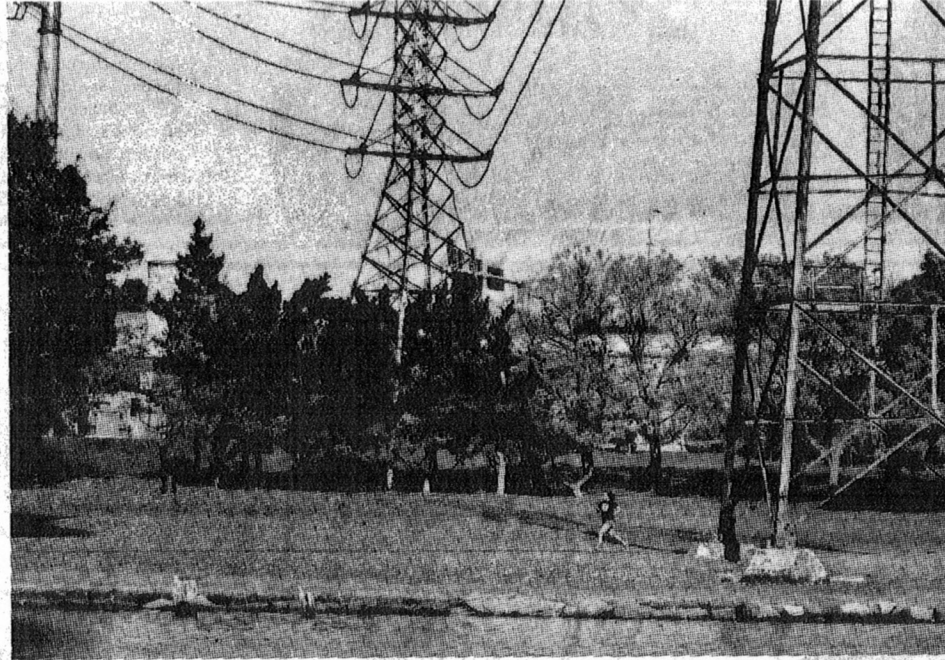
They are seeking to formally intervene in the docket so they can secure a commitment from PPL to bury the high-voltage transmission lines and “discontinue National Grid’s disparate and unjust practices as they relate to Providence communities, because all communities regardless of ethnicity or income should be treated equally as a matter of law.”

National Grid argues that the groups advocating for burial of the power lines don’t represent the public interest. But more to the point, the company says the allegation they’re making is flat-out wrong.

“This new suggestion that we wouldn’t consider burying lines underground in the city of Providence or areas close to India Point Park because of demographics is hard to comprehend,” the company said in an email. “Just a stone’s throw from the park we are investing tens of millions of dollars to replace two major underground transmission lines that are powering a large portion of the capital city. And out of all the communities we serve, Providence likely has the most underground infrastructure.”

National Grid also says that the line-burial projects cited by the groups are all lower-voltage distribution lines, which are generally easier and cheaper to put underground, and that in all three examples the work was paid for by third parties.

In Middletown, Superstorm Sandy relief funds, as well as private dona-



In 2014 A runner is dwarfed by towers carrying power lines over India Point Park.

ANDREW DICKERMAN/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

tions, funded the burial of the wires stretching behind Second Beach to Sachuest Point. In Smithfield, Fidelity Investments paid to bury the lines outside its corporate headquarters. And in Westerly, the work was paid for by a private party that National Grid declined to name.

To bury the lines in India Point Park, the latest cost estimate is \$34 million. About half the funding is in place from various government sources, and the other half would have to come from electric ratepayers.

National Grid is not alone in wanting Riley’s group and its supporters barred from the proceedings at the Division. PPL, too, opposes their motion to intervene, saying the burial issue is under jurisdiction of other authorities. Advocacy staff at the Division of Public Utilities and Carriers agree and say that the matter belongs where it’s being handled – at the state Supreme Court on appeal.

The court case was filed in 2018 after the state Energy Facility Siting Board approved an agreement that would shift the power lines off parts of the waterfront but fail to put them underground. The plan was put forward by National Grid and the City of East Providence, who argued that burial was too risky and too expensive.

Under their joint proposal — which was one alternative listed in a 2004 settlement agreement — the lines and their support structures would be moved away from India Point Park as well as from a waterfront area in East Providence. They would instead run 950 feet across the Seekonk River between two structures on the south side of the Washington Bridge.

But though they would be less obtrusive, the lines would still be highly visible along parts of the waterfront.

So Friends of India Point Park and the City of Providence appealed. This

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Email response from National Grid

past March, Attorney General Peter Neronha filed a brief in support of their case, raising concerns that the energy siting board didn’t follow proper procedures in making its decision and calling on the court to remand the case back to the board.

The Attorney General’s office has also made a motion to intervene in the PPL deal and a spokeswoman said Neronha is “looking at all aspects of this sale that have the potential to impact the public.”

National Grid says it is ready to move ahead with moving the lines, “but unfortunately ongoing legal challenges have further delayed these enhancements.”

As for whether PPL would agree to the burial project, the company says it’s withholding comment on policy issues until the Division makes its decision on the purchase.

“That said, we remain open to meeting with all stakeholders at the appropriate time to explore the best resolution to the power lines located at India Point Park,” said Mark Miller, director of communications for PPL Electric Utilities.

Riley said the burial proponents could wait for the Supreme Court decision, but it’s already been three years and there’s no expectation that the matter could be resolved soon. In the meantime, the big towers strung with wires remain in place through the park and if National Grid has its way, portions would still remain visible in the future.

“It would be a crime to have these things stick around another 100 years on the waterfront,” Riley said.