

Underground Arizona
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BEFORE THE ARIZONA CORPORATION COMMISSION

COMMISSIONERS
KEVIN THOMPSON – CHAIR
NICK MYERS – VICE CHAIR
LEA MARQUEZ PETERSON
RACHEL WALDEN
RENÉ LOPEZ

IN THE MATTER OF THE APPLICATION
OF TUCSON ELECTRIC POWER
COMPANY FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT
OF JUST AND REASONABLE RATES
AND CHARGES DESIGNED TO
REALIZE A REASONABLE RATE OF
RETURN ON THE FAIR VALUE OF THE
PROPERTIES OF TUCSON ELECTRIC
POWER COMPANY DEVOTED TO ITS
OPERATIONS THROUGHOUT THE
STATE OF ARIZONA AND FOR
RELATED

Docket No. E-01933A-25-0103

**UNDERGROUND ARIZONA'S
CLOSING BRIEF**

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1 INTRODUCTION

2 Underground Arizona respectfully submits its closing brief in the above-captioned
3 proceeding. Underground Arizona is a small, volunteer consumer-advocate intervenor whose
4 members have a background in institutional and corporate finance. Consistent with that
5 expertise, this brief addresses TEP's cost of capital — its **(I)** authorized return on equity, its **(II)**
6 ratemaking capital structure, and its **(III)** proposed Annual Rate Adjustment Mechanism — and
7 two further issues that keep ordinary ratepayers from paying for costs they did not cause: **(IV)**
8 the need for a distinct customer class for very large data-center loads, and **(V)** the imprudent
9 costs TEP incurred in its unsuccessful effort to overhead new transmission lines along Kino-
10 Campbell in the Midtown Reliability Project. On the first three, the record shows that TEP's
11 proposal would require ratepayers to fund returns well above what investors actually require,
12 with no corresponding benefit to reliability or the utility's access to capital; on the fourth, its rate
13 design would spread the cost of serving very large loads across customers who do not cause it;
14 and on the fifth, it would charge ratepayers for the consequences of TEP's own management
15 error.

16 A single principle runs through the cost-of-capital issues: a just and reasonable return is
17 fixed by *market* signals — what investors actually demand, and what the capital markets actually
18 charge — not by regulatory artifacts, such as the returns other commissions have previously
19 authorized or the capital structures that regulators themselves have set. TEP's case leans on the
20 artifacts; the market evidence points the other way on return on equity, on capital structure, and
21 on the formula rate that would freeze both.

22 I. TEP's Authorized ROE Should Equal Its Market-Based Cost of Capital

23 Underground Arizona supports the position of Attorney General Mayes and her expert
24 witness, Mark Ellis: a utility's authorized rate of return should equal its cost of capital — no
25 more. That is not merely sound finance; it is the legal standard. *Bluefield* entitles a utility to earn
26 its cost of capital, and *Hope* holds that it may earn no more, because ratemaking "involves a
27 balancing of the investor and the consumer interests." *Bluefield Water Works & Improvement Co.*
28 *v. Pub. Serv. Comm'n*, 262 U.S. 679 (1923); *Fed. Power Comm'n v. Hope Natural Gas Co.*, 320
29 U.S. 591, 603 (1944). Any authorized return set above the market cost of capital is, by definition,
30 "an unjust enrichment of investors at the expense of consumers." Ex. AG-1 (Ellis Direct) at 15.

31 The cost of equity is a function of the market, and it is far below what TEP requests.
32 Applying conceptually sound implementations of the two valid market-based models — the
33 Discounted Cash Flow Model and the Capital Asset Pricing Model — Mr. Ellis estimates TEP's
34 cost of equity at an average of approximately 6.14%, against TEP's 10.68%, and recommends a
35 return on equity of approximately 6.07% versus TEP's 10.77%. *See* Ex. AG-1 (Ellis Direct) at 6-
36 7, Fig. 1.

1 By contrast, the utility's higher figures rest on comparisons that do not measure the
2 market's cost of capital at all. Every ROE witness in this case relied to some degree on returns
3 authorized for other rate-regulated entities (or their holding companies). Authorized ROEs are
4 not market prices; they are prior regulatory opinions. A model benchmarked to them — such as
5 the Risk Premium Model, which "equates COE to ROE" — merely propagates other
6 commissions' judgments, so that "one regulatory commission relies on the book rate of return for
7 this company as evidence of the required rate of return, [and] it will copy the mistake." Ex. AG-1
8 (Ellis Direct) at 7, 35; *see also* Transcript at 1369 (other witnesses' models remain "benchmarked
9 to other authorized ROEs either directly or indirectly"). Real-world, market-based metrics are
10 available and should be used.

11 TEP's principal counter-argument — that a lower ROE would harm its parent's stock
12 price — fails as a matter of law. As Mr. Ellis testified:

13 "Fortis's stock price would likely experience a one-off downward adjustment if TEP's
14 ROR were aligned with its market-based COC. But maintenance of the parent company's
15 stock price, *per se*, is not a direct regulatory concern; balancing the interests of
16 consumers and investors is regulators' primary concern. *Hope* settled this question over
17 80 years ago."

18 Ex. AG-1 (Ellis Direct) at 99; *accord* Transcript at 1354 (under *Hope*, "it's explicitly not a
19 regulator's concern to maintain a particular stock price"). The stakes for ratepayers are
20 substantial: Mr. Ellis estimates that adopting a market-based return in place of TEP's proposal
21 would reduce customer bills by approximately 10.5%, or roughly \$148 million per year — about
22 \$200 per year for an average residential ratepayer — while maintaining TEP's current
23 investment-grade credit rating. Ex. AG-1 (Ellis Direct) at 6.

24 II. The Commission Should Set TEP's Capital Structure Toward the Proxy-Group 25 Average

26 Return on equity is only one component of the cost of capital; the mix of debt and equity
27 is the other, and it is where TEP's proposal is most plainly out of line with its peers. Because the
28 cost of debt is far below the cost of equity, an over-equitized utility runs an inflated weighted-
29 average cost of capital (WACC) that ratepayers fund dollar-for-dollar. TEP's proposed 44.5%
30 debt / 55.48% equity structure is materially thinner on debt than the peer group used to
31 benchmark its return. Arizona Large Customer Group (AZLCG) and Freeport Minerals witness
32 David Garrett — drawing on the same proxy companies TEP's own witness, Ms. Bulkley, relied
33 upon — testified:

34 "According to Value Line, the average capital structure mix for the proxy group consists
35 of 57% debt and 43% equity. This debt ratio is notably higher than TEP's proposed
36 capital structure consisting of only 44.5% debt."

37 Ex. AZLCG-Freeport-1 (Garrett Direct) at 47.

1 A regulated utility has no natural incentive to correct this, because under cost-of-service
2 ratemaking a higher WACC yields a higher revenue requirement. As Mr. Garrett explained, "a
3 Commission standing in the place of competition must ensure that the regulated utility is
4 operating at the lowest reasonable WACC. Left unrestrained, utilities will increase their equity
5 and decrease their debt to unreasonably increase their profits that flow through to shareholders."
6 Ex. AZLCG-Freeport-1 (Garrett Direct) at 46. The Commission should therefore move TEP
7 toward the proxy-group average of 57% debt / 43% equity.

8 TEP will argue that the proxy companies' capital structures should be measured at the
9 operating-company level rather than the parent level. That objection is both internally
10 inconsistent and analytically backward. Ms. Bulkley relied on the parent companies' betas, stock
11 prices, and earnings throughout her cost-of-equity analysis, departing to the operating-company
12 level only for capital structure — the one place where doing so lowers the indicated return. *See*
13 Ex. AZLCG-Freeport-2 (Garrett Surrebuttal) at 18–19 (the proxy companies' financial metrics
14 are "inextricably linked to the capital structures of those same entities"). More fundamentally,
15 operating-company equity ratios are themselves set through the regulatory process;
16 benchmarking to them is circular — the same market-versus-artifact defect that infects an ROE
17 anchored to other authorized ROEs. Holding companies, by contrast, set their leverage in
18 competitive capital markets, and so reflect the market's actual judgment of the debt a utility
19 enterprise can bear. And to the extent those parents also carry riskier, unregulated operations, that
20 would counsel *less* leverage, not more — yet they still operate at roughly 57% debt, confirming
21 that TEP's lower-risk, purely regulated profile can prudently support at least the proxy-group
22 average.

23 That such a structure is prudent and readily financed is confirmed by TEP's own
24 corporate family. TEP's ultimate parent, Fortis Inc., carries roughly 57% debt in its consolidated
25 capital structure — the very ratio TEP resists — while maintaining investment-grade credit
26 ratings. *See* Ex. S-9 (Parcell), Sch. DCP-2, Sch. 4 (Fortis common equity about 40%, long-term
27 debt about 56%, 2020–2025). The enterprise of which TEP is a part sustains 57% debt at
28 investment grade; TEP's operating company, with its stable, asset-backed, monopoly cash flows,
29 can do the same.

30 Indeed, the comparison runs *a fortiori*. Fortis holds only an equity interest in TEP — the
31 most junior claim on the utility's assets — and a holding company's debt is structurally
32 subordinated to the operating utility's own senior debt. TEP itself is a strong investment-grade
33 credit, rated A3 (stable) by Moody's and A- by S&P. *See* Ex. TEP-10 (Callahan Direct) (TEP's
34 debt is "currently rated A3 (stable outlook) by Moody's and A- (negative outlook) by S&P"); Ex.
35 S-9 (Parcell), Sch. DCP-2, Sch. 3. If the capital markets extend investment-grade debt to the
36 more junior, structurally subordinated holding-company position at roughly 57% leverage, then
37 TEP — the senior, asset-backed, investment-grade operating company that actually generates the
38 cash flow — can prudently carry at least as much. And because debt is materially cheaper than
39 equity, moving TEP toward that structure lowers its weighted-average cost of capital, and with it

1 the bills ratepayers pay. The only limit is the point beyond which additional leverage would
2 increase TEP's WACC — a point the proxy-group average does not approach.

3 TEP's response is that a heavier debt load risks a credit-rating downgrade. The record
4 refutes the significance of that concern, and on this point the Attorney General's and the Large
5 Customer Group's experts agree: a downgrade's cost is trivial next to the ratepayer savings.

6 "[T]ypically a one-notch downgrade for a utility increases their incremental cost of debt
7 ... by 5 to 10 basis points. ... it's not like ... the cost of debt goes from five [percent] to
8 seven. It goes from 5 to 5.05 to 5.1 ... because utilities in general are starting from a very,
9 very strong credit position. To go from an A3 to a Ba1 is ... still very, very strong credit."

10 Transcript at 1368 (Ellis).

11 "[T]he savings from a lower ROE that might trigger a downgrade ... [is] typically 20 to
12 1. In other words, customers save 20 times more on ROE — when you include the gross
13 up for taxes — than the incremental cost of debt that they might incur from a downgrade.
14 Sometimes it's higher than 20 to 1, but it's almost always 20 to 1 or more."

15 Transcript at 1353 (Ellis).

16 "[E]ven if the Commission's decisions authorizing a lower ROE and/or higher ratemaking
17 debt ratio for TEP resulted in a one-notch credit rating downgrade, the marginal impact
18 ... would be minimal compared to the overall savings customers would receive from the
19 lower ROE and overall WACC. In other words, customers would gladly pay a slightly
20 higher cost of debt to achieve lower overall capital costs."

21 Ex. AZLCG-Freeport-1 (Garrett Direct) at 54; *accord* Transcript at 2044 ("we don't care about
22 the cost of debt relative to the much more important cost, which is the weighted average cost of
23 capital. It's like saying if you pay me \$5, I'll give you \$20 back").

24 Critically, TEP never quantified a rebuttal to any of this. Its witnesses offered only a
25 qualitative "financial tailspin" narrative "not ... accompanied by a single quantitative
26 calculation" — no cash-flow-to-debt computation, no comparison to the rating agencies'
27 published downgrade thresholds, and no quantification of customer impact. Ex. AG-2 (Ellis
28 Surrebuttal) at 2. Assertion is not evidence, and the 5-to-10-basis-point and 20-to-1 figures stand
29 un rebutted on the numbers.

30 **III. The Commission Should Reject the Proposed ARAM**

31 Underground Arizona opposes the proposed Annual Rate Adjustment Mechanism
32 (ARAM) and urges the Commission to reject it outright. RUCO and other parties have detailed
33 why the mechanism is unjust — chief among them that it shifts financial risk from the Company
34 to its ratepayers and would subject customers to years of annual increases with no offsetting
35 protection. *See* Ex. RUCO-1 (Zwick Direct) at 7.

Underground Arizona adds one point of its own, which follows from Section I and is an independent reason to reject the ARAM. By the Company's own description, the mechanism freezes this case's cost-of-capital determination — the authorized ROE and capital structure — for the life of the formula, while updating the Company's costs and plant to actuals every year; the Annual Updates expressly exclude any renewed "cost of equity studies." *See* Ex. TEP-1 (TEP Application) at 8. A formula that tracks the market for the utility's *costs* while freezing its *return* would let the Company keep earning an above-market ROE on a growing rate base, year after year, with no correction until the next full rate case. That defect cannot be cured by adjusting a single input; it is a reason the ARAM should not be adopted at all. Should the Commission nonetheless adopt an ARAM over Underground Arizona's objection, it must not use the mechanism to lock in an above-market return: the ROE embedded in the formula should be set no higher than Mr. Ellis's estimate of TEP's market cost of equity — approximately 6.07%. *See* Ex. AG-1 (Ellis Direct) at 6-7. Or, it should be set through a market process just like the cost of debt.

IV. The Commission Should Establish a Very Large Load Customer Class So That Data-Center Costs Fall on the Customers Who Cause Them

Underground Arizona supports the recommendation of Walmart's witness, Dr. Jaime McGovern, that the Commission require TEP to create a distinct Very Large Load ("VLL") customer class. TEP has no such class today. *See* Ex. WAL-2 (McGovern Direct) at 5. Yet the Company is already building to serve very large single-site loads — data centers and the like, at 75 megawatts or more — that impose costs unlike those of any existing customer, and TEP acknowledges that serving them requires incremental investment in new generation, storage, and transmission. *See id.* at 5, 7. Without a class that isolates those costs, the Company recovers them through general rates, so the customers who cause the costs do not pay them — residential and small-business customers do. *Id.* at 6-7.

The proposed ARAM would turn that cost-shift into a five-year certainty, which is a further reason to reject it — and, if it is adopted, a reason a VLL class must be in place first. Because the ARAM freezes this case's revenue-allocation percentages "by the formula" for 2026 through 2031, there is "no mechanism within the ARAM formula to assign specific generation or transmission costs to VLL Customers" in those years. Ex. WAL-2 (McGovern Direct) at 8-9. As TEP spends to connect these loads, the formula would instead route roughly 60.7% of the cost to the Residential class and another 12.1% to Small General Service — automatically, and with "no recourse to recover those funds." *Id.* at 9. Once embedded in base rates, those costs cannot practically be unscrambled in a later case. *Id.* Residential customers, already facing an approximate 14% bill increase, would subsidize speculative data-center growth from newly formed shell companies for five years. *Id.* at 8.

The remedy is straightforward, and Underground Arizona urges the Commission to adopt it. TEP should be required to establish a VLL customer class — mandatory for any customer

1 with a non-aggregated load of 75 MW or more at a single point of service — within six months
2 of the final order, and to include that class in the cost-of-service study filed in its next rate case.
3 *Id.* at 10. Until that study is complete, the Commission should require TEP to track the costs and
4 load characteristics of these customers, and should order a one-way balancing account that
5 refunds to the remaining classes any VLL-related costs not directly assigned to the VLL class,
6 resolved annually. *Id.* Tying cost to cause in this way protects ordinary ratepayers and serves the
7 same principle of cost causation that governs every other part of a just and reasonable rate.

8 TEP's answer is that no class is needed because it will serve each large load under a
9 special contract — an Energy Supply Agreement (ESA) filed with and approved by the
10 Commission. That is no substitute, and it is a second reason to set the class in this proceeding.
11 Reviewing an ESA is not a rate case. As TEP's own witness confirmed, the Commission's role
12 there is to "approve or deny that ESA with those rates" — an up-or-down vote on a deal TEP has
13 already negotiated, not an open proceeding in which rates are tested on a contested record.
14 Transcript at 3219 (Rademacher). And TEP would not commit that these agreements will even be
15 public: asked whether the special contracts would carry nondisclosure agreements, and whether
16 the prices would be disclosed, its witness answered only, "I can't answer that." Transcript at 2929
17 (Elliott). This is not hypothetical — the Commission approved one such data-center agreement in
18 December 2025, outside this case, and TEP's witnesses declined to testify to its terms. Transcript
19 at 2650. That approach settles cost-allocation questions falling on every captive ratepayer in
20 bilateral, potentially confidential contracts, outside the open proceeding where ratepayers can
21 intervene, take discovery, and cross-examine. A customer class set here, on this record, is the
22 transparent alternative — and the forum ratepayers actually have.

23 **V. Costs of TEP's Failed Attempt to Overhead the Midtown Reliability Project on**
24 **Kino-Campbell Should Not Be Recovered from Ratepayers**

25 Underground Arizona respectfully requests, pursuant to the invitation the Administrative
26 Law Judge extended at the close of the evidentiary hearing, that the Commission take official
27 notice of the Midtown Reliability Project line-siting docket, Docket No. L-00000C-24-0118-
28 00232 (LS Case No. 232) — the record of which includes the final Superior Court judgment
29 described below — and, independently, of that judgment itself as a public court record. *See*
30 Transcript at 3391 (a party may "ask that I take official notice of ... dockets in their closing brief
31 if they include ... a more complete picture of what they're referencing," subject to objection in
32 reply briefs). The fuller picture follows.

33 TEP's Midtown Reliability Project called for a new 138 kV transmission line along an
34 approximately 3.5-mile segment of Kino Parkway, a designated Gateway Corridor. The Tucson
35 Unified Development Code provides that "[n]ew utilities ... along Gateway Routes shall be
36 underground unless relief is otherwise granted." Tucson UDC § 5.5.4(B)(1)(a). Rather than
37 comply, TEP sought to build the line overhead, recharacterizing new construction as a mere
38 "upgrade" of existing facilities in order to fit an exception. The City's Zoning Administrator

1 rejected that characterization and ruled the project was new development that had to be
2 undergrounded; the City's Board of Adjustment upheld that determination; and, when TEP
3 brought a special action in Superior Court, the Court affirmed — finding "the DMP is not an
4 upgrade, but rather is new development" subject to the undergrounding requirement, and
5 rejecting TEP's preemption and estoppel defenses. *Tucson Elec. Power Co. v. City of Tucson*
6 *Board of Adjustment*, No. C20235484 (Ariz. Super. Ct., Pima County, July 3, 2024) (a record of
7 which is contained in Docket No. L-00000C-24-0118-00232).¹ TEP did not appeal, and the
8 judgment is final. TEP even admitted in that litigation that "there are no, or very few, existing
9 transmission lines running along Kino." *Id.* That confirms the line was new construction, not an
10 upgrade.

11 TEP's multi-year, unsuccessful effort to avoid the undergrounding requirement delayed
12 the Project. As a direct result of that delay, TEP was forced to spend, in its own words, "more
13 than \$10 million to Band-Aid its existing system, which is old and outdated" — a temporary
14 stopgap serving only until the delayed system comes online — "and it will have to spend another
15 \$10 million in repairs to this old system if [it] miss[es] the 2027 in-service date." *See* Ex. TEP-8
16 (TEP Witness Presentation) at 25² and Tr., Vol. I, at 29–30 (July 8, 2024), both in the Midtown
17 Reliability Project line-siting docket, Docket No. L-00000C-24-0118-00232 (LS Case No. 232),
18 of which Underground Arizona requests official notice above; TEP's own witness read the same
19 statement into the record at hearing. Transcript at 3216.

20 These costs are embedded in the revenue requirement that ratepayers are asked to fund.
21 TEP's own revenue-requirement witness, Mr. Rademacher, confirmed on the stand that there are
22 no distribution or substation costs that TEP is *not* attempting to recover in this case. Transcript at
23 3216. The Band-Aid expenditures are distribution and substation costs; by TEP's own admission,
24 they are in the request.

25 They should not be. The presumption that a utility's costs were prudently incurred is
26 rebuttable, and a utility may not recover from ratepayers the costs of its own management error.
27 TEP made a discretionary choice to pursue an overhead line that a plainly worded ordinance did
28 not permit, to recharacterize new construction as an "upgrade," and to litigate that losing position
29 through the Zoning Administrator, the Board of Adjustment, and the Superior Court. The delay-
30 driven "Band-Aid," and the further \$10 million TEP projects if the 2027 date slips, are the direct
31 and foreseeable consequences of that choice. Ratepayers should not be charged for the cost of a
32 self-inflicted, unsuccessful effort to avoid a legal obligation TEP could have satisfied at the
33 outset. The cost of delays must be considered before pursuing a path of conflict. Otherwise, TEP
34 is incentivized to engage in unnecessary conflict.

35 The Commission should therefore disallow from rate base and the revenue requirement
36 the costs attributable to the Midtown Reliability Project delay and the associated litigation —

¹ <https://docket.images.azcc.gov/0000211476.pdf#page=11>

² <https://docket.images.azcc.gov/0000211343.pdf#page=45>

1 including the more-than-\$10 million temporary substation expenditure — and should decline to
2 authorize recovery of the additional costs TEP projects if the in-service date slips.

3 **CONCLUSION AND REQUESTED RELIEF**

4 For the reasons above, Underground Arizona respectfully requests that the Commission:

- 5 **1. Authorize a return on equity equal to TEP's market-based cost of equity,**
6 consistent with the analysis of Attorney General witness Mark Ellis, rather than
7 the excess return TEP requests; and
- 8 **2. Reduce TEP's ratemaking equity ratio toward the proxy-group average of**
9 **43% equity / 57% debt,** consistent with the analysis of Arizona Large Customer
10 Group witness David Garrett, in order to minimize TEP's weighted-average cost
11 of capital; and
- 12 **3. Reject the proposed Annual Rate Adjustment Mechanism;** or, if an ARAM is
13 adopted over Underground Arizona's objection, set the ROE embedded in the
14 formula no higher than Mr. Ellis's estimated market cost of equity (approximately
15 6.07%); and
- 16 **4. Direct TEP to establish a Very Large Load customer class** for any customer
17 with a non-aggregated load of 75 MW or more at a single point of service — with
18 interim cost tracking and a one-way balancing account that refunds the other
19 classes for any such costs not directly assigned to that class — so that the costs of
20 serving large data-center loads fall on the customers that cause them, as requested
21 in Section IV; and
- 22 **5. Disallow the costs of TEP's failed effort to overhead on Kino-Campbell in the**
23 **Midtown Reliability Project** — including the more-than-\$10 million temporary
24 substation expenditure caused by the resulting delay — as imprudently incurred,
25 and take official notice of the line-siting docket (Docket No. L-00000C-24-0118-
26 00232) and the final Superior Court judgment in No. C20235484, as requested in
27 Section V.

28 On cost of capital, both experts demonstrate that TEP retains its investment-grade credit
29 rating under these recommendations, and that any incremental cost of debt from a possible one-
30 notch downgrade is trivial — on the order of 5 to 10 basis points, roughly 1/20th of the offsetting
31 ratepayer savings. But the thread running through this brief is broader than the cost of capital. In
32 each of these issues, TEP asks its customers to pay more than a just and reasonable rate allows:
33 an above-market return, frozen in place for years by the formula; the cost of serving data-center
34 loads, spread onto the households and small businesses that do not cause it; and the price of
35 TEP's own failed effort to avoid a legal obligation. A just and reasonable rate is the reverse —
36 the market cost of capital and no more, no errors locked in beyond correction, and only the costs
37 each customer actually causes. The relief requested above would deliver substantial, durable

1 savings to TEP's customers while honoring the *Hope* and *Bluefield* command to balance investor
2 and consumer interests.

3 RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED this 24th day of July, 2026.

4 By /s/ Daniel Dempsey
5 Daniel Dempsey, Executive Director
6 Underground Arizona
7

1 ORIGINAL of the foregoing will be e-filed this 24th day of July 2026 with:

2 <https://efiling.azcc.gov>
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