

A Carolina Forest neighborhood wanted to buy light poles from Santee Cooper. They can't do it without an act of the state legislature

By Charles D. Perry

Nov 21, 2019 Updated Nov 25, 2019



Plantation Lakes pays Santee Cooper more than \$8,500 each month for light poles.

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When Santee Cooper sent Bob Sweet an email last month, the Plantation Lakes homeowner hoped the message would finally explain how his neighborhood could acquire its 220 light poles from the utility. Instead, he was informed that the process was much more complicated than he — and some utility staff — had imagined. It would take an act of the state's General Assembly to make that transfer happen.

“The majority of the people in the HOAs don’t have a clue how much money they are throwing down the drain because of monopolistic practices like this,” Sweet said. “We need to figure out how to get the word out to them to generate a lot of righteous indignation over this situation.”

Before he received the Oct. 31 email, Sweet had spent months exchanging messages and calls with Santee Cooper staff, even meeting in person to discuss his questions. Plantation Lakes’ primary concern is the more than \$8,500 per month the community pays to lease light poles and pay for their power. The neighborhood’s leaders estimate the community has covered the cost of the infrastructure multiple times over.

Sweet serves on Plantation Lakes’ street lights committee, and he’s also reached out to other property owners associations about his concerns. The Carolina Forest Civic Association has been working with Sweet and the association has even dedicated a section of its [website](#) to this issue.

Until last month, there was hope among those groups that Santee Cooper would be able to sell HOAs light poles, possibly at a reduced rate.

Utility staffers even told Sweet that Plantation Lakes would be allowed to acquire the lights, poles and portions of the wiring.

But when Santee Cooper’s legal team learned what other staff members had proposed, the attorneys pointed out that a sale isn’t possible because state law doesn’t allow such a purchase without approval from the General Assembly, according to an email from the utility to Sweet. That message and other exchanges have been [published](#) on the Carolina Forest Civic Association’s website.

“As we mentioned in the meeting, this was uncharted territory, and there have been several issues we needed to check and verify,” Carlita Goff, an area distribution engineering supervisor, wrote in an email to Sweet. “Although this was an unusual request, in an effort to be responsive to you as our valued customer, our distribution engineering team began investigating a possible sale of the lighting system. After researching the request, and specifically after meeting with the internal legal team, Santee Cooper has determined that we will be unable to sell the lighting assets to Plantation Lakes.”

Santee Cooper spokeswoman Tracy Vreeland also confirmed that Plantation Lakes — or any similarly situated neighborhood — has limited options.

“Turns out state law won’t allow us to sell the lights,” she said in a text message. “They can leave things as they are, downgrade poles, or they can cancel the contract and have the poles removed.”

For Sweet, those options aren't viable.

“That’s ludicrous,” he said.

So what he’s begun discussing with the civic association is launching a campaign to encourage state lawmakers to address this issue in Columbia. He's researching the issue and speaking with other HOA leaders about building support for changing the system.

He knows the timing isn’t ideal. Lawmakers are debating the utility’s future, including whether to sell the power provider. Light poles might be important to Sweet's neighbors, but they don’t rank high on the priorities of the legislature at the moment.

State Rep. Tim McGinnis, R-Carolina Forest, said Santee Cooper's status will need to be addressed before lawmakers deal with the utility's infrastructure issues. However, McGinnis, who lives in Plantation Lakes, supports Sweet's efforts and said he will focus on the light poles eventually.

"If an HOA wants to buy lights back from a power company, they should be able to," McGinnis said. "I believe in free markets."

Sweet hopes the state can find a path to ending these longterm utility agreements, which he calls “untenable.” Not just for his community, but others.

“It goes beyond Plantation Lakes,” Sweet said. “It’s really beyond Carolina Forest. It’s beyond Santee Cooper. It’s all of South Carolina.”

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