Paterson mayor pitches Great Falls microgrid to Christie administration

By David Giambusso

3:14 p.m. | Feb. 3, 2016

TRENTON — Paterson Mayor Jose "Joey" Torres said Wednesday he wants to take one of his city's oldest treasures — the Great Falls — and convert it into a microgrid that not only serves the city, but encapsulates the history of the falls and nearby hydroelectric plant for future generations.

Microgrids, small power grids that operate independently of regional grids, are a key element of resiliency planning for many state and local governments as climate change results in bigger and more devastating storms. With the damage wrought by Hurricanes Irene and Sandy, New Jersey municipalities have been exploring ways to develop their own grids so when the next storm comes, the lights stay on.

"We want to make the Great Falls and the power it unleashes every hour, every day the centerpiece of a state of the art microgrid that can bring clean, renewable and reliable power to our city and our state," Torres said Wednesday morning during the annual Mayors Legislative Day, hosted by the state League of Municipalities.

The event is an opportunity for mayors to address members of Gov. Chris Christie's cabinet directly. Torres used the opportunity to pitch his microgrid idea to Richard Mroz, president of the state Board of Public Utilities.

"Showcasing a microgrid facility that features the largest hydroelectric plant in the state, coupled with the resiliency features so needed in these times makes Paterson home to an exciting pilot project," Torres said. "The fact that it will be housed inside a national park, attracting multitudes of visitors, is icing on the cake."

Mroz, a proponent of microgrids, seemed open to the idea.

"If that's an invitation to come visit, I accept," Mroz said. "From what I know of the existing infrastructure and the power plant and what we have outlined within the [Energy Master Plan, it is] very possible the kind of microgrid project that we should work together to advance."

The Great Falls has been generating hydroelectric power for more than 100 years and helped make Paterson a hub for manufacturing in the 20th century.

In a follow-up interview, Torres said he got the idea for a microgrid from Alexander Hamilton.

"The reason why it's really cool — it was that vision from Alexander Hamilton to really power the Great Falls," Torres said.

Hamilton visited Paterson in 1791 and had the idea to harness the 70-foot falls, fed by the Passaic River, to power local manufacturing. By the 20th century, the falls and the waterways around it were powering local textile mills and locomotive factories.

The nearby hydroelectric plant was refurbished in 1987 and is operated by an out-of-state concern, Torres said, selling energy back onto the general grid. Torres said he would want to retrofit the plant and keep the power local, something he believes would lower costs for the city.

"This arrangement has been ongoing for, I think, 40 years so we're at the end of our lease period and we're at the beginning of our licensing period," Torres said.

The plant currently can power about 6,000 homes. Torres said he wants to see if it can be used directly to power city facilities, the park that surrounds the falls, even the old Hinchcliffe Stadium. Torres said he would also want to make it an educational center that highlights the history of hydroelectric power in Paterson and its potential future role.

"Make it an educational piece. This area in the center of town and our crown jewel [would be] blackout free," Torres said. "How cool is having power that you cogenerate yourself?"

--additional reporting by Ryan Hutchins

POLITICO