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PSC to take up utilities' storm responses

Outages 10 times worse in Montgomery County, delegate says

by Margie Hyslop | Staff Writer

Maryland's House majority leader will press Pepco, Montgomery County and the state's Public Service Commission on Tuesday as to why the utility's customers in Montgomery suffered electric power outages at a much higher rate than did residents in other areas during February's snowstorms.

"Montgomery shouldn't be 10 times worse than other jurisdictions; it didn't have that much more snow," said Del. Kumar Barve (D-Dist. 17) of Gaithersburg.

"I don't think there's any pressure being put on them to really look into why," he said.

Barve said he hasn't gotten any answers yet as to who was at fault, but he hopes a hearing Tuesday morning that will bring utilities companies before the PSC to answer questions about their response to the record storms will yield some information and lead to improvements.

Two factors may have resulted in the trouble, said Mary Scholl, Barve's legislative aide.

The county planted some trees under power lines, and it no longer trims trees, including those near power lines, every three years, Scholl said.

Under a Maryland law enacted more than 40 years ago, no one may work within 10 feet of suspended high-voltage lines, including operating equipment to trim trees, without first notifying the utility and cooperating with it.

According to Montgomery County spokeswoman Esther Bowring, if trees are within 10 feet of power lines, the county tree-trimming crews "cannot touch those branches."

Bowring said that it has been Montgomery County policy for 30 years not to plant large trees under power lines.

"If there are any trees [under the lines], they are older than 30 years or someone else planted them," she said.

In an e-mailed response to The Gazette, Pepco spokesman Clay Anderson said that as long as large trees are allowed near power lines there will be some damage and outages.

Anderson said Pepco trims regularly but is restricted by a Maryland law that limits trimming to two-years' growth.

Often, Pepco trims trees under lines in a V-shape to clear a path for lines, Anderson said.

The utility has proposed a more aggressive tree-trimming policy to the PSC, and action is pending, Anderson said.

In a hearing before the County Council recently, Pepco said it must get consent from property owners to trim trees on private property and that obtaining that permission can be difficult.

In testimony filed with the PSC, Scholl said visiting emergency crews have said Pepco's system is "outdated" and that equipment often is patched rather than replaced.

Only 1.4 percent of Pepco's outages during the February snow storms were from equipment failure, Anderson said.

Better tree-trimming practices have been used by other utilities, and Pepco should look at implementing them, she said in her testimony.

The hearing begins at 10 a.m. at the PSC offices in Baltimore.

Staff Writer Erin Cunningham contributed to this report.