

MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL AND PEPSCO DISCUSS POWER RESTORATION AFTER OUTAGE

Emergency Medical Equipment Notification Program and prioritizing issues were the main focus of the hearing.

By [Ben Gross](#) | [Email the author](#) | 6:00am

In an impassioned meeting with Pepco officials Thursday, Montgomery County Council members raised concerns about Pepco's priorities for restoring service during major outages like those experienced this summer.

The group met in Rockville as part of continuing discussions on the problems and safety concerns about the numerous Pepco outages this summer in which hundreds of thousands of Montgomery and Prince George's residents were without power for multiple days. The council's Public Safety Committee and the Department of Health and Human Services focused this meeting on how Pepco has responded to the needs of people who depend on electricity for life-supporting medical devices.

"Why can't you play a more active role in assisting the vulnerable?" asked Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At Large) of Pepco's president, Thomas Graham.

Graham replied that since Hurricane Isabel in 2003, restoration of service after such large weather events has become his company's priority.

"Maybe the county can do the outreach when events occur so we can focus on restoration," Graham said.

Elrich reminded Graham that [Pepco's reliability is among the worst in the country](#).

Graham countered that the company has introduced a \$256 million plan to improve reliability on a day-to-day basis.

"Nothing is more important to us than reliability, but people should still have a home emergency kit and a back-up plan," he added.

Pepco does have a program through which customers who rely on electricity to power life-support machines at home, such as respirators, can get information on planned outages and severe weather alerts. Currently, 370 county residents are enrolled in the free program, called the [Medical Equipment Notification Program](#).

During the summer outages, however, these people often had problems getting their power back online, which Kim Watson, vice president of Maryland affairs for Pepco, explained was a function of the utility having to focus its efforts on bigger picture issues first.

"Just like they have to clear major arteries [for snow removal] to access secondary streets to get to residential streets and finally to cul-de-sacs," Watson said, "we have to first address major issues - downed wires, hospitals and other utilities like WSSC - then move onto transmission lines, substations, main lines and finally individual service lines."

Councilman George Levanthal (D-At Large) suggested that an alternative to the emergency notification program needs to be found, since it was not able to forewarn enrollees of the unexpected July storms.

Watson agreed, saying that Pepco is working on ways to communicate better with seniors. The agency has had meetings with the [Senior Beacon](#).

Council members were also concerned with Pepco's system of prioritizing customers in an outage.

The utility has a weighted priority list that focuses on getting hospitals, 911 centers and water and sewage plants up and running before all other customers, including households.

"Isn't it possible that a person on life support may not receive attention before a shopping center?" Councilman Roger Berliner (D-District 1) asked.

Graham responded by saying that it is possible that scenario could happen.

"We try for the circuits with largest amount of customers first," he said.

Berliner also asked that more information about the weighting system be made public, to which Graham responded, "We'd prefer to keep that in our operation zone."

At the end of the meeting, attendees agreed that the county and Pepco need to collaborate more effectively. Graham committed to providing a more detailed response to the issues raised within 30 days.