

Pepco, Gaithersburg to plan improved emergency response

Utility officials defend July storm response, promise improvements

by Danielle E. Gaines | Staff writer

Emergency management officials from Pepco and the city of Gaithersburg will meet soon to plan a coordinated reaction to future bad storms.

Three senior Pepco officials appeared before the Gaithersburg mayor and City Council on Monday to answer questions about the company's response to snowstorms in February and three severe summer storms that left hundreds of thousands of Pepco customers in Montgomery and Prince Georges counties without power for as many as five days.

"It was a rough year for us. It was a rough year for the area," said Thomas H. Graham, Pepco region president. "We understand that our customers are frustrated with what took place.

"The major events are something that we can't do anything about. The blue sky days are what we have created a reliability improvement plan for."

He was joined by Janet Randolph, manager of customer relations, and George Nelson, vice president of operations and engineering, at the informal meeting.

Councilman Jud Ashman said Gaithersburg is ready to help Pepco move more quickly in response to storms.

"I think the biggest thing you can do is reach out to us. Let us help you restore power," Ashman said.

The city and Pepco agreed to set up a meeting of their emergency management employees to plan storm responses.

Graham stressed Pepco's five-year reliability enhancement plan, unveiled in August.

The \$256 million plan includes projects to cut trees, shore up primary distribution lines and increase transmission — three of the six main reliability improvements the company promised. The plan also includes efforts to harden substations, bury some wires, automate outage response and replace damaged underground cables.

Nineteen improvement projects are scheduled this year in Gaithersburg, Darnestown and Germantown.

Council members asked Graham and Nelson about specific outages in the West Riding, Quince Orchard Park and Washingtonian Woods neighborhoods.

Nelson explained underground cables in some neighborhoods are nearing the end of their life cycles. The lines can be fixed by a chemical flush or full replacement.

Replacing power lines identified as major contributors to the System Average Interruption Frequency Index is a cornerstone of the reliability improvement plan.

The index — which measures the average number of outages per customer and is a key reliability measure monitored by the state commission — was in 2009 about 61 percent higher for Pepco than for BGE and more than 100 percent higher than for Allegheny.

Major SAIFI contributors scheduled for improvement in Gaithersburg include the area around Emory Grove Road from Strawberry Knoll Road and Grover Road and Goshen Road between Odend'Hal Terrace and Centerway Road.