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Montgomery County Council, Leggett call for investigation of Pepco

Utility proud of storm response despite criticism

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

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Pepco's response to last week's power outages that left more than 300,000 customers in the dark at one point was "unacceptable," according to Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), who is questioning why it took the utility days to mobilize sufficient contractors to repair the lines.

Some Pepco customers were without power for five days.

In a July 29 letter to Joseph Rigby, director, chief executive officer and president of Pepco Holdings Inc., Leggett wrote, "The unreliability of your service must be addressed."

Leggett has formed a work group to study Pepco's "poor service" and options for improvement, he wrote.

Pepco spokesman Andre Francis said the company is satisfied with the bulk of its response to the outages, which left 301,000 customers without power at its peak.

"We're completely happy with the way that operations was able to respond," he said, referring to the crews that worked to repair the lines.

The company admits its customer information system — which included faulty automated messages telling customers their power would be turned back on in September — was poor.

Two-thirds of Pepco's more than 302,000 Montgomery County customers were without power at the same time during the first 24 hours after the July 25 storm.

Whether or not Pepco responded well after the storm, the Montgomery County Council wants the Maryland Public Service Commission to investigate the company's overall reliability and whether its infrastructure — rather than extreme weather — is to blame for outages.

The County Council sent a letter July 29 to Douglas R.M. Nazarian, chairman of the PSC, that states, in part: "Even on cloudless, idyllic days, our residents have experienced

unexplained outages. And this happens all too often leading us to ask whether or not Pepco has sufficient in-house staff to maintain its infrastructure."

Francis said Tuesday that he was unable to provide the number of Pepco workers who responded to the outages — three business days after The Gazette requested the figure.

The employee with that information, Stanley Wisniewski, the vice president of operations, had been in meetings "since last week," Francis said.

"He's a VP. That's what they do. He's busy," he said.

Councilman Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac, who initiated the letter to the commission, said the PSC should "direct Pepco to make the investments necessary for those neighborhoods that are experiencing high levels of outages" so that they can attain acceptable service.

That investment might include burying power lines in some parts of the county that are prone to outages. Areas such as Bethesda, which he represents, experience frequent outages, Berliner said.

Francis said that it would cost as much as \$15 million per mile to bury existing power lines. Power lines in newer developments are required to be buried.

If all existing overhead power lines in the county were buried, the cost would be \$21 billion, he said.

Pepco officials have said that the cost of burying the lines — or any other infrastructure improvements — would be passed on to their customers.

Bryan Moorhouse, special counsel to the chairman of the Public Service Commission, said complaints about Pepco have risen at a result of the storm, but he did not know the amount or nature of the complaints.

Following any major incident, like the recent storm or this winter's blizzards, utility companies are required to submit a report about their response to the commission, Moorhouse said.

The commission then issues its own response to the report. Moorhouse said the commission's report on Pepco's response to the blizzards has not been completed. He did not provide a date for its release.

About one-third of the county's traffic lights also were out at the outage peak July 25. Lack of electric service also caused some libraries, summer school classes and recreation programs to shut down for hours or days.

After the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission's River Road plant lost power July 25, mandatory water restrictions were placed on the water and sewer utility's 1.8 million customers in Montgomery and Prince George's, to ensure water pressure needed for firefighting. The power loss interrupted processing at the plant, causing users to draw down stored supplies.

Francis said that because such severe storms are rare, Pepco does not have the necessary employees on staff to respond to such storms at all times.

Asked what Pepco was doing to better prepare for future storms, Hainey said one area needed improvement.

"Where we dropped the ball was in communicating to customers," he said.

Specifically, there were three communication problems based in the utility's information technology and automated response system, Hainey said. On July 25 an overwhelmed automated response system told many customers who reported outages that they would have to wait weeks or until September for repairs. Next, Pepco's online outage maps were removed from the company's website after heavy traffic made them inaccessible or slow to appear.

Then, after Pepco announced that on July 27 at 3 p.m., customers would be able to get real estimates of when their service would be restored, the automated response system failed again.

Staff writer Margie Hyslop contributed to this report.