

Pepco halts tree removal along rustic roads

Elrich wants county more involved in utility's procedures

by Erin Cunningham, Staff Writer

Pepco has stopped removing trees in protected parts of the upcounty after an incident last week in which century-old trees were leveled, drawing criticism from environmentalists and residents.

Now, Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park says he is considering drafting legislation requiring the utility to consult with the county's arborists before trimming or removing trees.

"Their solution seems to be to cut down every living thing," Elrich said of Pepco.

He said reports that the utility was cutting trees on the opposite side of the street from power lines motivated him to get involved.

Pepco is allowed to trim trees in the county's right of way, but if the utility is planning to remove trees from the same land it needs permission from the county, county spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield said. Trimming trees on private property requires the permission of the property owners.

Pepco spokesman Clay Anderson said the company had permission from private landowners to trim trees on their property Thursday in the area of Budd Road and Hughes Road in Poolesville.

But because those roads are among 97 in the county deemed to be rustic, Lacefield said they constitute a gray area in the law.

Under the county's rustic roads master plan, trees close to the roads are a significant feature of the roads. The majority of such roads are in the county's Agricultural Reserve in upcounty.

Anderson said Pepco has removed and trimmed 71 of the 79 trees it plans to along Hughes road, and 37 of the 46 targeted trees on Budd. But he was unsure if all of that work took place last week.

Those who witnessed the work in the area Thursday said the trees were cut down, not trimmed.

“They just leave the carnage behind,” said Caroline Taylor, who lives at the corner of Budd and Hughes roads. “To me, it’s shocking to see what looks like almost a natural disaster has occurred.”

Taylor serves as executive director of the Montgomery Countryside Alliance, a nonprofit committed to land preservation.

Anderson said Pepco is working to schedule meetings about the trimming and tree removals, but no such meeting had been scheduled as of Tuesday.

“Pepco has decided not to schedule further tree removal but will continue tree trimming pending an upcoming meeting between county residents, officials and Pepco,” he said in a written statement.

Elrich said it appears as if Pepco is retaliating against the county for its public statements about the poor reliability of the utility’s service.

“It almost feels like revenge,” he said. ““You don’t want power outages, so we’ll just make the place look like a mess.””

Elrich said that 10 years ago, while he was serving on the Takoma Park City Council, the local law was changed to require Pepco to consult with city arborists before cutting.

Such a law, if enacted in the county, would allow the government to track where Pepco plans to trim or cut trees and involve trained arborists in the work, he said.