

# Berliner Blasts Pepco, Demands Change

By Katie Griffith, *Montgomery Village Patch*. Published: July 9, 2012.

After almost 10 days of power outages amid a crippling heatwave, Montgomery County Council President Roger Berliner says he's fed up.

In a statement released Monday, Berliner lambasted Pepco for its response to the June 29 derecho storm that left as many as 443,000 area residents without power, some up to a week or more.

"Our residents have had enough," Berliner said in a written statement following a press conference. "While this was a big storm and outages are to be expected, Pepco's performance – on every level – was unacceptable. The length of the outages. The appalling communications. The computer glitches and data discrepancies. The list can go on and on."

Berliner's suggestions to improve Montgomery County's power source include:

- adopting a system of performance-based ratemaking
- requiring Pepco to hire more linemen to make service calls
- reorganizing and updating Pepco's computer system, data retentions capacity and communications
- modernizing the power grid to sustain future, more violent storms, including adding undergrounding and redundant feeders
- moving toward "micro grids" and distributed generation systems – such as roof top solar power
- exploring alternatives to Pepco, such as publicly owned power coverage

"Public power doesn't serve shareholders – it is solely responsible to its customers," Berliner said. "I think it is time for our state legislators to give Montgomery County the authority we need to explore public power through enabling legislation."

A local chapter of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers says it wouldn't support a publically owned approach. However, IBEW does acknowledge that electrical deregulation in 1999 by the Maryland General Assembly designed to provide customers with more options and increase price competition has instead caused a number of the issues Pepco customers currently face.

"Deregulation [gave] utilities an easy way to boost their profits by reducing their payrolls and cutting back on training, recruitment and basic maintenance – shortcuts that pleased Wall Street shareholders but caused major headaches for customers and staff," the IBEW Local 1900 union chapter said in a release.

Jim Griffin, president, financial secretary and business manager of Local 1900, which represents 1,150 Pepco employees, said the answer to the Pepco problem lies in hiring more full-time employees and better maintenance of infrastructure.

“You can’t run a system as complicated as this one with a patchwork of authority from county to county or city to city,” Griffin said. “It is such a large area that encompasses so many jurisdictions that you would end up with half a dozen little agencies that don’t answer to each other.”

Residents across the county have suggested alternatives to fix Pepco’s reliability issues.

In an interview in Potomac Village during the aftermath of the storm, June Meyers, a 20-year resident of Potomac, suggested a graduated income tax implemented by the county to put the power lines underground.

“I don’t know why Montgomery County doesn’t float some kind of tax proposal to put the lines underground,” she said. “In the end it’s cost effective because families are paying \$3,000 to \$4,000 a year when these storms happen anyway.”

In the meantime, Pepco has requested an extension on a decision that would impose a 4 percent rate hike for its Maryland customers, according to a Washington Post report. If approved, the rate hike would increase the average residential bill by \$5.50.

The Maryland Public Service Commission was expected to announce its decision on the request by this Friday, but Pepco filed a last-minute request to delay the decision another week, claiming ongoing storm cleanup diverted its and the commission’s attention.

The commission is expected to issue its decision by July 20.

*Editor's note: Story updated to correct 443,000 outage figure was for total residents, including Montgomery County.*