

Pepco angers Montgomery County neighborhood residents by pruning beloved cherry trees

By Ian Shapira and Victor Zapana, *The Washington Post*. Published: July 19, 2012.

The big orange trucks emblazoned with the words “Tree Experts” rumbled into the neighborhood off Connecticut Avenue on Tuesday with one mission, one target. Pepco had ordered them to slash limbs from the half-century-old Yoshino cherry trees that line the streets of Rock Creek Woods — part of the utility’s efforts to minimize frequent and sometimes lengthy power outages in Montgomery County.

As the men in hard hats hacked away, Julie Marcis and her husband confronted the crew, pleading with them to stop ruining the trees.

“You feel like your insides are crumbling when you look at what they did,” Marcis said. “You have no control, you can’t do anything, short of throwing yourself in front of one of their trucks to stop them, which I considered.”

Like so many other people in the area, Rock Creek Woods residents were already furious with Pepco for the multiple days they endured without power during a relentless heat wave a few weeks ago. Now neighbors here are angry over Pepco’s strategy to prevent future outages: the slicing and dicing of much-beloved Yoshino cherry trees.

The outrage in Rock Creek Woods, just north of Kensington, and elsewhere in Maryland signifies the conundrum faced by Pepco: People get mad when trees fall on power lines and cause long outages. But residents also fume when they feel Pepco prunes too aggressively and spoils their neighborhood’s aesthetic charms.

“Pepco’s not doing their job of delivering power, but this is not going to solve our problems either,” said Rock Creek Woods resident Sue Holbeck, a cancer researcher at the National Institutes of Health who called the tree trimming “a PR effort.”

Bob Hainey, a Pepco spokesman, said Asplundh crews hired to prune trees across the region follow state guidelines. “We only cut what the state tells us to do and what’s in the best interest of the trees,” Hainey said.

On Thursday, the Montgomery County Council examined Pepco’s effectiveness after a powerful thunderstorm known as a derecho swept through the Washington area on June 29, leaving more than 1 million people without power. Montgomery County was the hardest hit in the region. Nearly 60 critical county facilities, such as senior centers, lost their power for days; at the worst point, the county had about 238,000 outages.

At the hearing, Pepco officials blamed trees for much of the damage to about 2,400 Pepco power lines, 200 transformers and 240 utility poles that fell during the storm.

David M. Velazquez, Pepco Holding's executive vice president for asset management, praised the "significant additional tree-trimming resources to clear the trees that are usually the cause of poles and wires falling down."

But tree trimming is often as sore a subject in Montgomery as the outages.

Council President Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda) is so alarmed about aggressive tree pruning that he recently proposed a bill that would require utilities to make a "reasonable attempt" to notify property owners of tree trimming and to provide them with a "customer bill of rights." Berliner's bill would also generally prohibit trimming trees along rural roads or in county-marked historic areas.

Caroline Taylor, who lives in Poolesville, is a vehement supporter of that legislation. She said about 30 trees on her property were needlessly sliced up by Pepco — at 2:30 a.m., no less. For more than a year, Pepco had asked for Taylor's permission to trim those trees, but she had always said no.

"Apparently no didn't mean no. They cut down live, healthy, standing trees," Taylor said. "It's almost like we were, you know, subject to a home invasion or something."

Over in Rock Creek Woods, residents could hardly suppress their anger at Pepco for ripping out limbs and vegetation in the center of the cherry trees and turning them into shapes resembling slingshots.

On Tuesday night, Marcis dashed off an e-mail to county officials and journalists with the subject line: TREE MUTILATION.

Adam Fogel, chief of staff to Montgomery County Council member Nancy Navarro (D-Midcounty), promised to look into the matter.

"Navarro was very troubled by finding out this information because she's aware of the history of the neighborhood and those trees," Fogel said. "She understands there was quite a fight to get those trees there in the first place. We see this situation in Rock Creek Woods as unique. These were trees that were planted for a special purpose by a particular community."

Between 1959 and 1960, as Rock Creek Woods was being built by architect Charles Goodman, neighbors asked the county to plant Yoshinos alongside their three curving roads. The cherry trees form a canopy and provide shade. For Washingtonians in the know, Rock Creek Woods is a less crowded place to see the same cherry trees that become so popular each spring at the Tidal Basin and in the Kenwood neighborhood near Bethesda.

Katharine Waldmann, one of Rock Creek Woods's first residents, said she wavers between disappointment and sympathy for Pepco.

"It did seem like they were having to cut more than in previous years, but from Pepco's point of view, they feel they're being so blamed for the outages and that they haven't gotten around to trimming," said Waldmann, vice president of the Rock Creek Woods Civic Association. "The problem is that we don't think the cherry trees are causing the outages. It's other trees."

Over in Kenwood, longtime resident Barbara Libbey said that Pepco crews chopped off some parts of her neighborhood's cherry trees earlier this year before the derecho. "Whatever they did didn't seem to do any good, because we lost power for four and a half days," Libbey said.

On Wednesday, Rock Creek Woods homeowners complained that, contrary to Pepco's claims, the utility did not abide by state regulations that require advance warning of tree trimming.

Marcis and her neighbors greeted one another Wednesday with mournful looks.

"I feel pain in my chest," said Val Campbell, a massage therapist who stopped her car in the middle of the road to talk with Marcis. "I try to be very accepting. But I feel hate. I normally do not feel hate. But I hate Pepco."

"My head hurts," Marcis said.

"I had a cherry tree that died about 10 years ago. I cut out a part, and had a ceremony for it," Campbell said. "I burnt it as part of an offering. I was thinking of getting others in the community to do it, and have a healing ceremony."

"Yes," Marcis said, smiling. "We need healing."