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# OPINIONS & VIEWS

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## THE FEDERATION CORNER

### *PEPCO Outages: Fruit Of Deregulation, or Trees?*

#### **January 12th Civic Federation Delegates Meeting on Electricity Reliability**

Outages caused by Tropical Storm Isabel and the thunderstorms of August 26 to 28, 2003 will be discussed at the January 12th meeting. Representatives from Pepco and the State of Maryland People's Counsel will make presentations on what occurred and what is being done to reduce the number and severity of future outages in Montgomery County. Representatives of BGE and Allegheny Power will also be present to answer questions for areas served by their utilities. Over 80% of the residents of Montgomery lost power during the Tropical Storm Isabel.

Some customers were out of power for over a week. In presentations to the Public Service Commission, the electric utilities indicated significant damage was done to their power lines by trees on private property that fell or were blown into the lines.

These are trees that would normally not be trimmed or pruned since only trees on the right-of-way or in front of residents' houses would be trimmed to protect the distribution system. Branches on private property would be trimmed if they were within 10 feet of the power lines connecting individual house lines to the distribution system.

But from an environmental perspective, the bigger the tree the better. Healthy, mature trees clean the air of more pollutants, provide more oxygen, and do a superior job of controlling soil erosion than saplings and weak trees can. We have to preserve our trees and create sustainable urban forests, especially of champion trees, which arborists view as the best of the best.

And while Pepco blames trees, which are vitally important to soil, water, and air quality; for the homes they provide to predators of rodents and mosquitoes; and for the environmental savings against the sun and wind, in addition to their aesthetic importance, Tyson Slocum from Public Citizen will offer another perspective of how the outages are related to deregulation.

According to Tyson, radical economists persuaded enough state legislators around the country that having utilities regulated by the states, setting rates and reinvestment requirements to insure fairness and reliability, was communism, and needed to be abolished. However, these economists failed to apply their theory before states voted for deregulation. The

first state to apply this theory was California--and we all saw what happened there.

Maryland had a system that was not broken in terms of rates, and the People's Counsel argued against deregulation. But the Maryland Legislature did not listen to the People's Counsel. The legislation was reportedly industry driven. So in addition to problems of reliability that Montgomery County residents experienced during Hurricane Isabel and even before that, rates will rise dramatically in 2004 if deregulation is not somehow reversed.

How possible is it to undo deregulation, and what options do we have? And is putting the lines underground really more expensive than the costs of outages, or losing trees whose benefits over 50 years are valued at \$50,000 apiece? This will be part of the discussion at the Delegates' meeting on January 12th. All meetings are open to the public.

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#### **Upper Rock Creek**

The Upper Rock Creek (URC) Coalition has been working to insure that our "green wedge" in which we live, and which is a principal watershed, remains just that! Right now our area is faced with "over development"---increased densities which threaten to degrade our streams and well water. It goes without saying what the impacts will be on our already congested roads and schools. The Freeman property (on 108 across from Johnsons' Nursery) is currently zoned for approximately 100 homes.

We wish we could say that we were winning this battle with "over development" and that our elected County Council is really concerned with our small community, but that is not the case. We seem to be presenting our community views to a majority of the "County Council" that is not listening. We have been meeting with individual council members to make sure that they are aware of our community desires.

Richard Klein, a professional environmental expert who has a record of success in these battles, studied and presented "real" data describing the necessary impervious surface area cap to insure preservation of this environmentally sensitive watershed. Mr. Klein testified on our behalf at the County Council Hearing.

We have also hired Norman Knopf, a noted land use attorney, to give us guidance on a number of critical issues. In addition, we have shared expenses and worked closely with the Olney Coalition. Thank you Olney Coalition!

In January the entire County Council will review and vote on the final Master Plan by mid-February or before.



The URC and the Olney Coalitions have planned a traffic study under the guidance of Richard Klein, and he has completed a school impact study for the URCC. This data will be presented to the full Council prior to their debate on the Master Plan. We all know we will NOT have a second chance. The "environment" is not a bargaining unit with which we can negotiate. Please help us to continue making our voices heard and preserve our quality of life in this "green wedge".

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#### **Olney Finds Rural Neighborhood Cluster (RNC) Zoning Is a Sham**

Numerous Olney residents are alarmed by efforts of Park and Planning to convince them that there is something beneficial to the community in the RNC zone. Olney residents have discovered that it is like a "roll your own" zone that has been abused in terms of developers' exceeding the density. Developers will also use the lot sizes most profitable for them and not necessarily be compatible with the surrounding communities. Olney residents are being told that the Master Plan will tailor RNC to the given tract of land, but the Master Plan is only a set of guidelines. It appears that the RNC is a density giveaway to developers.

#### **THE FEDERATION CORNER**

*The Sentinel Newspapers have offered the Montgomery County Civic Federation ([www.montgomerycivic.org](http://www.montgomerycivic.org)) an opportunity to present the issues and opinions of affiliated community organizations. The viewpoints expressed may not necessarily be those adopted by the Federation. Any resident who would like to contribute to this column should contact Federation Delegate Alyce Ortuzar at 301-774-6617.*