

"Federation Corner" column
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Power to the people

by Jim Humphrey
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The violent thunderstorm that swept through Montgomery County on Sunday, July 25, was a form of blessing in disguise for the many county residents for whom reliability of electricity service outside of major storm events is a persistent problem.

Both County Executive Isiah Leggett and Governor Martin O'Malley sent letters to the Maryland Public Service Commission urging an investigation into the adequacy of the effort by the Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO) in responding to the widespread outages caused by the storm, an investigation which the MPSC began this past Tuesday, August 17. In his August 6 letter, Governor O'Malley remarked that the Commission had "conducted an investigation into the utilities' performance during the February 2010 (snow) storms," but suggested that "another review is appropriate now in light of a second serious service interruption in such a short window of time." But, in their letters, neither Leggett nor O'Malley mentioned the unexplained outages on clear, sunny days that have been plaguing county communities for years.

In referring to a violent storm as a blessing in disguise, I am in no way trying to minimize the horrendous negative impact on the citizens who were affected. Some businesses were closed for days while employees, like restaurant wait staff, went unpaid for that period. And thousands of county residents experienced some level of property damage to their automobiles or homes, or personal physical injury, displacement from dwellings now deemed unlivable, loss of perishable food stocks, etc. But the July 25 storm was the incident that finally brought to light the situation that many residents have been complaining about for years--that even on storm-free days, electric power outages occur frequently in the PEPCO service area.

To their credit, the County Council did point out this problem in a July 29 letter to the MPSC, stating that "even on cloudless, idyllic days, our residents have experienced unexplained outages." I know condo owners in downtown Bethesda have complained to Councilmember Berliner about the problem. My neighborhood, just west of downtown Bethesda, experienced half dozen or so unexplained outages in the past year on clear, sunny days. One Darnestown family I know has complained for the past two or three years of electricity failures outside of storm events. And on the local television news this week I heard a Gaithersburg resident complain that sometimes power goes out in his neighborhood "when there's a slight breeze."

I believe that the Commission decided to widen the scope of their PEPCO investigation in response to the County Council's expression of concern about non-storm event electricity outages and to consumers' letters of complaint about "third-world service that seems to go out every time the wind blows." At the hearing PEPCO executives said the company was striving to improve, but admitted that it ranks among the nation's worst performing utilities in the frequency of outages--in the lowest 25 percent. And those statistics are for regular level of service, and do not include outages from major storms.

On Tuesday, after nearly three hours of grilling, PEPCO officials unveiled a 6-point plan to the MPSC which envisions \$250 million in upgrades over the next five years--\$100 million more than they had previously anticipated spending. Their plan includes \$37 million for tree trimming, \$75 million to upgrade selected substations, \$32 million to replace priority underperforming "feeders," \$50 million for automated meters and smart grid hardware, \$12 million to meet new load growth, and \$37 million for selected undergrounding of cables in residential areas.

I know from experience that the county government could be more aggressive in getting overhead utilities undergrounded in commercial areas. The approved master plan for downtown Bethesda urges overhead utilities be placed underground, but "because of the cost...recommends that such a program follow the proposed priority list (focus on major streets and pedestrian routes) and proceed as resources allow." In considering a 2004 Federal Realty Investment Trust plan for a block-long development on the east side of Arlington Road in Bethesda (they had just redeveloped the west side of the same block), the Planning Board urged the developer be required to underground overhead utilities. But then-County Executive Doug Duncan waived the requirement claiming the \$1 million price tag (the developer's own estimate) was too costly to make undergrounding of utilities a condition of project approval, although the cost was only 2 to 3 percent of the company's profit from development of that block of Arlington Road.

To me, the most inadequate sounding part of the \$250 million PEPCO plan is that it will only bring us up to an "average" level of service, with plans to spend only a mere \$12 million to meet new load growth. Meanwhile, our County Council and Planning Department are predicting that by the year 2030 another quarter of a million residents will arrive in the county; and, they are rigorously planning for the 100,000 new homes and 160,000 or so new jobs needed to accommodate them.

But apparently no one has told PEPCO that the county is planned to grow by 25% in the next 20 years, so their costly 5-year plan to get us to an "average" level of power service reliability may be totally inadequate in a few short years after completion. Our government officials really should inform PEPCO of the growth being planned for the county in the next 20 years, and not leave them in the dark.

Meanwhile, the MPSC has scheduled a hearing in our Council chambers in Rockville for August 30 starting at 6 p.m., at which citizens will be able to testify on their frustration with unexplained outages in PEPCO service or their storm-related outage experiences. Or, if you would prefer, you can send written comments to the Maryland Public Service Commission, William Donald Schaefer Tower, 6 St. Paul Street, Baltimore, MD 21202.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net