

"Federation Corner" column
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Nothing new about unreliable electricity service

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The topic of one of the first Federation Corner columns, printed in the January 1, 2004 edition of this newspaper, was the unreliability of electricity service in Montgomery County. As baseball great Yogi Berra once remarked, "it's deja vu all over again." Reprinted here in its entirety is that column published more than seven years ago.

"Outages caused by Tropical Storm Isabel and the thunderstorms of August 26 to 28, 2003 will be discussed at the January 12th (2004) 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 (2004). All meetings are open to the public."

The preceding Federation Corner column was designed as a "teaser" to attract members of the public to attend the January 2004 meeting of the Montgomery County Civic Federation, at which the informational program portion of the evening was on the reliability of electricity service in the county.

As is always the case, the presentation by the program speakers was followed by a question and answer period. The minutes for the January 12, 2004 MCCF meeting contain a question from an audience member that bears repeating: if electricity outages were caused by trees or tree limbs falling on wires, "why is telephone service so reliable in these same storms?" The answer the questioner received was that "electrical wires are not insulated, but telephone wires are."

The question, however, remains a valid one. How can PEPCO claim that a majority of service outages are caused by tree limbs knocking down power lines, when telephone lines are strung between the very same poles as electrical lines, yet telephone land lines remain in service while, at the same time, the electricity goes out?

In hearings before the Public Service Commission in August 2010, PEPCO officials unveiled their six-point Reliability Enhancement Program, a \$250 million upgrade of its electricity distribution system. The Program includes \$37 million for "tree trimming" and another \$37 million for "selected undergrounding of cable in residential areas"--over 30% of projected expenditures targeted at preventing the 14,000 some miles of overhead lines in the county from being knocked down by trees during storm events.

The result of the trimming is that many trees in the public right-of-way are being cut into a shape referred to as the PEPCO "U". More than 50% of the households in the county lost power during this winter's recent storm event. In all probability, a majority of those outages were caused not by lines downed by trees but by aging infrastructure--underperforming "feeder" lines, outdated transformers, insufficient substation capacity, and failure to anticipate new load growth.

My suggestion to PEPCO is that they stop spending money on their marketing campaign to reassure the public they are "listening to our customers who are telling us we need to improve service," and instead sink that money into updating their system. PEPCO officials don't need their customers to tell them there is a problem--they've known it as far back as 2004, which is when they appeared at a Civic Federation meeting to discuss the problem.

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