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Testimony of Montgomery County Council Vice President Valerie Ervin before the Maryland Public Service Commission

PEPCO, Case Number 9240- Public Comment



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ROCKVILLE, Md., August 30, 2010—I want to begin by thanking Chairman Nazarian and all the members of the Public Service Commission for holding this public hearing in Rockville. As you know, from the County Council's recent correspondence, thousands of residents throughout Montgomery County experienced extended power outages from the back-to-back blizzards that knocked out power during the winter and our recent summer storms.

I am disappointed that Pepco has not taken the corrective actions that were promised to the County Council in the aftermath of the winter storms. Pepco promised our residents that they would receive better customer service and reduced outage times during storm events; however, Pepco has much work to do to restore consumer confidence in its ability to provide reliable service. We now know that Pepco ranks in the bottom 25 percent of U.S. utility companies in the frequency of outages, and this does not include outages for major storms.

During all of these storms, my office fielded numerous calls from residents across District 5, which includes Kensington, Silver Spring, Takoma Park and Wheaton. Consistent patterns emerged from the calls and letters that I received with residents living in the same neighborhoods reporting: restoration times from five to seven days, misinformation provided about restoration activities, and life threatening situations for those who suffer with disabilities and seniors.

For example, Kensington-Parkwood residents reported feeder lines that repeatedly go out, not only when violent storms occur, but when there is simply a few drops of rain. Residents in Hillandale, Silver Spring and Wheaton called me to report that they are consistently some of the last neighborhoods to have their power restored in Montgomery County. I also received calls from residents living in multi-family buildings who were upset because once the generators went out, neighbors were forced to climb multiple flights of stairs to get to their apartments. Finally, I devoted much of my staff's time to connecting disabled and elderly residents with the County's Department of Health and Human Services.

In addition to the human toll these storms and the conditions resulting from extended restoration times took on our residents, the costs associated with these extended power outages were considerable. Restocking refrigerators, purchasing generators, flashlights, batteries and other items has become expensive for residents.

Another issue that is of concern to me and District 5 residents is the location of utility poles in the right-of-way that allegedly fail to comply with accessibility guidelines under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Residents have reported that new pole installations often block the sidewalk and old poles are not removed in a timely manner. I plan to meet with residents about this issue next month and will keep you posted if additional action is necessary.

While I appreciate all of the hard work of Pepco employees, I look forward to a full evaluation of steps that Pepco can take to shorten restoration times and improve its communication with customers when bad weather leaves us in the dark.

We all know that we can't control acts of nature; however, it is imperative that Pepco develop strategic plans to respond to these events with all deliberate speed and to develop a proactive approach to providing reliable service. Pepco has a long way to go to restore the confidence of Montgomery County residents. Our residents deserve nothing less.

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