

Citizens sound off on ComEd power outage service

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State Rep. Elaine Nekritz, D-57th, questions the ComEd president during an Illinois House's Public Utilities Committee hearing on the recent power outages. The hearing was Tuesday at the Highland Park Country Club.
/ Rob Dicker~Sun-Times Media

HIGHLAND PARK — The Illinois House's Public Utilities Committee received an earful of gripes Tuesday about the poor service ComEd rendered during recent summer storms and then heard an optimistic reply from ComEd officials about they how hoped to change things in the future.

In a four-hour public hearing with 40 witnesses testifying and nearly 200 people in the audience at the Highland Park Country Club, the atmosphere was tense with even some catcalls reacting to some of the testimony.

Rep. Karen May, D-Highland Park, hosted the meeting and jokingly told ComEd officials, "You won't need hard hats today."

But, at times, they might have helped. Tim Anderson, executive director of the Illinois Commerce Commission, that regulates utilities, led off testimony by explaining various portions of the Public Utilities Act that require specific obligations that a utility must meet.

"Providing safe and reliable service to the public is one of the requirements," he said.

May then asked Anderson if the ICC has any legal provisions for levying a fine against a utility that failed to meet these criteria. The answer was no.

May then questioned Anderson about the utility's required capital investment to maintain and improve its infrastructure. Anderson responded that that ICC has no requirements on this.

"ComEd's investment in grid infrastructure goes up and down. Since 2008, it has generally gone down," he said.

May also questioned Anderson on the commission's policy on undergrounding a utility's wiring. Anderson said commissioners opposed the practice in considering recent legislation.

“We opposed it on its cost. It takes a lot of money to underground wiring, or dig up the street to repair it if faulty. It’s not perfect and is just too expensive,” he said.

Anne Pramaggiore, ComEd’s president and chief operating officer, carried the water for the embattled company. ”This has been a summer like no other,” she said. “We’ve had 10 big storms this year, the most in a decade.

“I’m personally aware of the public’s frustration,” she added. “They want fewer outages and prompt restoration of power when lines go down. So do we.”

She said the company was assessing its mistakes and trying to improve its customer communications. She expects an action plan to be unveiled by the end of the year addressing many of the criticisms received from the storm power outages.

Pramaggiore also made a strong appeal for Gov. Pat Quinn to sign Senate Bill 1652 which would authorize a \$2.6 billion, 10-year so-called Smart Grid program.

Heavily dependent upon technology, the utility would install smart meters in residences and improvements in transmission and distribution of electricity to the utility’s customers.

State Rep. Elaine Nekritz, D-Northbrook, questioned ComEd’s maintenance and reliability practices.

“Your maintenance budget this year is lower than last year. If you cut your maintenance, then your service reliability will continue to decrease,” she said.

Nekritz pointed out that ComEd has decreased its tree-trimmers this year by 22 percent.

“Less maintenance and a decreasing staff will not meet our needs. It’s people, not smart meters, that will make the difference in serving customers,” she said.