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# ComEd promises brighter tomorrow after feeling the heat

BY SUE TER MAAT AND ROBERT MCCOPPIN, Tribune reporters

Heckled by its customers and berated by lawmakers, ComEd officials are promising a brighter tomorrow for thousands of customers kept in the dark by this summer's record outages.

Faster response times based on ComEd's proposed "smart grid" should help, consumer advocates agree. But vows of future improvements did nothing for those who showed up at a hearing Tuesday demanding more immediate progress and compensation.

As the hearing stretched on for six hours before the House Public Utilities Committee, some of the roughly 200 in attendance complained that Commonwealth Edison never pays for spoiled food and other damages.

At one point, the committee's chairman, Rep. Thomas Holbrook, D-Bellefonte, tried to calm things down, saying, "Put down your torches and your pitchforks."

Jamming the Highland Park Country Club, many seethed as ComEd officials talked about how this summer's wild weather caused the outages. Ten significant storms hit the area with record or near-record extremes of wind, rain and heat, resulting in an unprecedented losses of power affecting 2.4 million customers.

Des Moines resident Joe Bagdonas, who said he lost power for two days during the July 11 storm, blamed ComEd for not maintaining its power lines.

"This is caused by failing infrastructure and lack of maintenance," Bagdonas said.

Glenview resident Bill Sallin testified that his power outages in July and August had nothing to do with recent storms, but were due to poorly maintained infrastructure like a blown transformer.

"ComEd doesn't care about its customers," Sallin said. "They only care about the bottom line."

ComEd's president and chief operating officer, Anna Pramaggiore, said the July 11 storm was unprecedented, slamming the Chicago area with golf ball-size hail and hurricane-force winds and cutting power to 900,000 customers.

Pramaggiore took the opportunity to lobby for the Energy Infrastructure Modernization Act, under which ComEd would spend \$2.6 billion over the next decade to improve its network and create a "smart grid."

The grid would notify ComEd immediately when and where there is an outage, automatically rerouting power to the area when possible. It would cost customers an estimated \$3 per month over a decade, and provide ComEd a profit margin of 10.25 percent for the first three years.

Such a system, ComEd estimates, would prevent 15 to 20 percent of power outages and help workers respond more quickly to the remaining outages.

It would also help consumers have a better idea of their energy consumption, which could help cut down on the estimated 10 percent of power that goes to "phantom load," such as unused computers and other devices left on standby.

"A real sea change in our service will require a more comprehensive plan of action," Pramaggiore said, "and deployment of new technology."

Earlier this year, state lawmakers approved the proposal. However, the Citizens Utility Board, while it supports the smart grid, believes the bill guarantees too much in profits to ComEd while reducing regulatory oversight, said the watchdog agency's executive director, David Kolata.

The utility would be required to improve performance but would be able to exclude the worst outages due to storms.

Gov. Pat Quinn has promised to veto the legislation, and Senate President John Cullerton, D-Chicago, is holding the measure in legislative limbo while trying to see if differences can be worked out.

"The ball is in ComEd's court," Kolata said. "They know they need to make some concessions."

Highland Park Mayor Nancy Rotering said ComEd is using the pending legislation as an excuse for poor performance.

Officials said city staff had fielded "abusive phone calls" from frustrated residents and had to pick up 22 tons of spoiled food at the city's expense.