



# TOWN OF NEW CASTLE

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April 10, 2018

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Chair of the NYS Public Service Commission  
Empire State Plaza Agency Building 3

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**RE: Case #18-00618, In the Matter of Utility Preparation and Response to Power Outages During the March 2018 Winter Storms**

**Jeremy M. Saland**  
(914) 238-4774

Dear Chairman Rhodes,

Town Administrator  
**Jill Simon Shapiro**  
(914) 238-4742

As local leaders, it is our most important duty to protect the health and safety of our residents. Being without power for any extended period is unacceptable. Losing power for 11 days, as was the case for some of our residents, is unconscionable. We must take every possible precaution to ensure that this does not happen again.

In the aftermath of the recent winter storm emergencies, the Town of New Castle solicited feedback from residents to improve our response to future incidents. We provide these observations and recommendations, in hopes that they will prove useful as you continue to assess the impacts of the storms and make changes to improve readiness, response, and recovery.

**OBSERVATIONS:**

**Headline: We've Been Here Before:**

- Residents feel like nothing has changed. None of the lessons learned from Sandy and other storms have resulted in improved response times:
  - "This is the third major power outage we have experienced in the last ten years."
  - "These storms are becoming more frequent and becoming our new normal."
- Moreover, residents observed that it felt like the same neighborhoods and streets seem to always lose power:
  - "This is the exact same story as Sandy: the exact same people lost power for the exact same reasons!"
  - "We live on a tertiary road are always the last to get our power back, I would like to see that change."

**Town Communications:**

- Many residents provided positive feedback on the Town's communication with residents.

- The Town's primary communication channels were emails, text messages and social media. Some residents expressed concern that they did not have access to electronic communications due to outages.
- The Town should continue to educate residents as to the multiple/ different communication modes the Town has established to keep its citizen's informed. A few residents felt that the Town should increase the frequency of its communications regarding road closures, warming centers, and status updates. On follow-up, it was determined that these residents had not signed up for both the codeRED and Nixle alerts.

#### **ConEd Communications:**

- Residents should be able to rely on the information that they receive from ConEd. They should get realistic updates to be able to plan for the safety and security of their families.
- Likewise, Town officials need better, more timely information from ConEd to be able to communicate with residents about the storm and to help ensure shelter plans for all residents.
- Residents should never receive "fake news" (e.g., robocalls telling them their power has been restored when it has not). The inability of ConEd to provide consistent and accurate information via texts, tweets, and its phone system was upsetting to residents and undermined their confidence in the information provided (e.g., the global ETR). In frustration, one resident said "Why were we lied to at every step of the recovery process?"
- If the ETR will not be met, it is better to share that information with customers earlier rather than later (e.g., don't tell residents at 10:30pm that their ETR is 11pm when they can look out their windows and see that there are no crews in sight).
- Town officials would like to receive a daily "press release" from ConEd with information that the municipalities could share with residents (e.g., number of repairs, transformers damaged and replaced, poles damaged and replaced, etc.).
- Town officials expressed frustration that residents were told that the town DPW needed to clear trees (in wires) before ConEd could perform its work. The DPW was ready to work and waiting on ConEd's cut and clear crews. Several municipalities felt that ConEd was trying to push blame onto the towns.

#### **ConEd Operations:**

- Residents agree that the response from ConEd was unacceptable: "Why was response to a very well-forecasted storm, beyond slow - I would say nonexistent?"
- Residents expressed frustration with "wire watchers" from Con Ed who "sit in their cars all day" and could not answer questions about when the area would be restored.
- Residents observed crews, particularly mutual aid, that were "waiting around" in parking lots for job assignments from ConEd. The Town and/or our municipal liaison should have more direct input in assigning the crews once they arrive in town.
- As town officials we understand where the largest outages and biggest issues in our towns are located and we want to provide input into the where crews are sent and the prioritization of

resources. Town officials want to know how many crews are in town and where they are heading. Residents want to know that their local leaders are able to represent them effectively

- in dealings with ConEd.
- Cut and clear crews should have been a priority for all communities. No community should have restoration crews until every road is cleared. Our town waited three days for cut and clear crews to arrive. When our roads are blocked, our first responders cannot respond to emergencies and residents are trapped in their homes. This is unacceptable.
- Despite being told that residents who were without power the longest would be restored first, our experience was that many customers who lost power during the second storm were restored sooner if they had an "easier" case.
- We felt that ConEd focused on down-county communities in order to restore a higher percentage of customers and "meet their numbers." Throughout the recovery, the highest outage percentages were in Northern Westchester towns. From a strategic planning and storm-preparedness perspective this was a bad decision: these communities are less well-served by public transportation, they have smaller roads that take longer to clear, and the people who live in these communities are far more likely to become isolated due to a storm event.
- ConEd's reliance on mutual aid from areas such as Canada, Wisconsin, and California meant that it took 48-72 hours just to get these crews on site. Once they reached our area, mutual aid crews needed to be brought up to speed on how the system works here versus their home state. This further slowed the recovery process.

#### **Internet, Cell Phone, and Cable Providers (Non-ConEd):**

- Several residents reported that while they "felt very fortunate" not to lose power, they did lose internet, cell phone, and cable service, which meant that they could not place or receive phone calls for several days. In an emergency, driving during a storm just to be able to place a phone call is dangerous.
- Downtown Chappaqua was similarly impacted for some cell providers, including Verizon.

#### **RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS**

##### **ConEd:**

##### **1. Bury the Lines**

- Residents expressed support for an infrastructure project to put all electrical wires underground, saying this project is "long overdue and warrants immediate and serious consideration."
- We understand the cost involved in burying all overhead electric wires may be prohibitive, but certainly burying overhead wires along major roads would be an important and more fiscally manageable first step.
- Some local neighborhood and individual residents have buried their power lines, but they note that "it does me no good when they are eventually tied to lines that are above ground."

- While we appreciate that the cost is overwhelming (\$1M/mi), we would like to see a cost/benefit analysis of whether burying lines now would save money in the future by reducing the cost of responding to storms.
- In addition, burying the lines would have the added benefit of beautifying our community and enhancing our property values.

## **2. Improve the Mutual Aid Process**

- Our community is interested the idea proposed by our County Legislator Mike Kaplowitz to “mothball” utility trucks, i.e., keeping extra trucks on hand that can be dispatched with mutual aid workers. This would potentially solve the problem of waiting several days for mutual aid crews to arrive, if the workers were able to fly as opposed to driving their trucks to places where mutual aid is needed.

## **3. Replace Dangerous Poles**

- ConEd should act expeditiously to remove and replace rotten, leaning, and “double” poles. The Town of New Castle found over 300 double poles during a survey conducted in 2017. We will consider legislation, if needed, to assess penalties for these dangerous poles.

## **4. Continually Assess and Trim Trees to Prevent Outages**

- Residents observed that there are many large trees near major roads that have the potential to fall on power lines. In heavy wind storms, it is “scary” to drive under these trees, many of which lean over the road.
- The Town, the State, and ConEd should be proactive in patrolling all local roads and identifying large tree branches leaning into roads or on top of electrical wires. This should be a continual area of focus, particularly during the good weather months.
- Con Ed should donate to the Town’s tree fund &/or plant a smaller replacement tree when trees are removed, which would reduce some of the push-back from taking down trees that pose a threat to their equipment.

## **5. Enhance Technology**

- ConEd should be able to assess, via improved grid mapping technology, the neighborhoods and streets that are “hot spots” (i.e., those that are particularly vulnerable to storm outages).
- Town officials recommend speeding up the installation of smart meters so residents don't need to report outages. This is preferable to asking residents to verify outages via text or robocalls.
- On the other hand, there are occasions when low-tech responses result in improved customer service. One resident suggested adding more temporary phone operators instead

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of routing calls through the IVR system, which the resident said seems to “magically erase” reported power outages.

- The Town recommends that ConEd install GPS in their trucks so that the location and exact composition of work crews can be readily determined. Although Con Ed provided municipalities with numbers of crews working in their respective locales, they did not know where the trucks were and how many/types of trucks were in a crew. The ability to be able to locate and know the extent your resources is critical to being able to effectively manage them.
- ConEd should investigate technology that can automatically notifies the utility when a lifesaving device and/or life support equipment loses power and goes on battery back-up.

## **New York State and Westchester County**

### **1. Break up ConEd’s Monopoly**

- Frustrated residents wonder “Why can’t we, along with towns who have had it with ConEd, secede from their sphere and set up our own power company?”
- We urge the PSC to use its authority to consider breaking up ConEd. We join with our fellow Northern Westchester towns in calling for this action to be taken – and further note, as the following article demonstrates, that this is an idea that was proposed after Sandy and is even more relevant today. <https://www.theexaminernews.com/puglisi-calls-for-con-ed-to-split-up-in-psc-complaint/>

### **2. Continue to Hold ConEd Accountable for the Storm Response**

- We are encouraged by the inter-municipal task force “United Westchester” launched by County Executive George Latimer and State Assemblyman David Buchwald, the public hearing chaired by State Senator Terrence Murphy, as well as the resolutions passed by the Westchester County Board of Legislators. Residents appreciate these proactive steps to hold ConEd accountable and encourage their continuation and follow-up.

### **3. Investigate Options to Improve Cell Phone Coverage During Outages**

The impact of the storms on cell phone towers was not clear to us or to our residents, but we would welcome county-level investigation on ways to strengthen coverage during power outages, particularly since many residents report no longer having a landline.

## Town of New Castle

### **1. Conduct Regular Tests of Emergency Notification Services:**

- The Town should periodically test the Nixle and codeRED emergency notifications to make sure that residents are receiving them, and to notify residents to sign up. The Town should leverage the codeRED robocall service, and should test this in advance.

### **2. Develop a Program to Assist Residents with the Purchase of Generators**

- New Castle residents are interested in buying generators, but they need more information about their options, as well as education about how to start the generator, how to fuel it, how to maintain it, etc. One resident suggested that the Community Preparedness Committee conduct research and help residents.
- Another recommendation was for the Town to assist with setting up “bulk discounts” with local stores for portable generators and with area providers for whole-home generators.
- Another recommendation was to revisit the permitting and approval process for generators to streamline and prioritize approvals and make the process easier for residents.
- *Note: The Town of New Castle would welcome support from the State and Westchester County on establishing this program and facilitating cross-municipality discounts, etc.*

### **3. Investigate and Promote Alternate Energy Sources**

- Residents expressed interest in a community solar energy program with backup battery storage, as well as other sustainable energy options.
- The Town should facilitate education for residents on how to disconnect from the power grid to leverage battery backup for solar power.

### **4. Focus on Neighbors Helping Neighbors**

- As announced by Suzanne Kavic, Chair of the Community Preparedness Committee, the committee will focus first on helping families and neighborhoods to prepare themselves for an emergency by creating emergency plans, identifying people who are most in need, and establishing skills and resource inventories.

### **5. Streamline Permitting Processes:**

- The Town should review the permitting processes for projects that are either directly or indirectly related to the storm, and should make every effort to streamline the process.

**6. Provide Information to Residents on How to Register for Special Needs:**

- The Town can provide information to residents about how to register for additional services during an emergency event. For example, residents can be encouraged to register their life-sustaining equipment with ConEd. The utility maintains a “critical need” list; residents with special needs should confirm they are on the list.
- Similarly, the Town has a program called “R U OK?” that should be promoted.

**CONCLUSION**

We look forward to working with you to improve readiness and response, and to hold each other accountable to the residents of this community. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Town Board, Town of New Castle

Robert J. Greenstein, Town Supervisor

Lisa S. Katz, Deputy Town Supervisor

Jeremy Saland, Councilmember

Hala Makowska, Councilmember

Ivy A. Pool, Councilmember