



Con Ed upgrades:

■ Utility says it's made many improvements, but Queens residents fear they could lose electricity once again

BY SOPHIA CHANG

sophia.chang@newsday.com

Cable by cable, Con Edison has been upgrading the electric grid that failed for nine days in Queens a year ago.

But despite the more than \$1 billion the utility says it has spent since that blackout on systemwide improvements, Con Ed's response remains under investigation. And some local residents said that miscommunications and delayed responses to last year's power outage leave them with little faith in the utility's promises this time around.

In the year since the July 17, 2006, failure of one of Con Ed's networks left 174,000 residents of western Queens without electricity for up to nine days, the utility says it has made \$90 million in improvements to that network, as well as a \$1.4 billion investment in the overall system. The improvements range from the cable replacement in Long Island City to reforms in infrastructure and customer service.

"We're very reliable, and we've made a lot of changes to improve the system," said Kevin Burke, chairman and chief executive of Con Ed, in a phone interview last week.

Still, the utility regulator for the state, the Public Service Commission, is continuing to investigate Con Ed's response to the blackout, with the possibility of financial penalties if the commission finds that the company did not act with prudence, according to a February PSC report. While Ann Dalton, a PSC spokeswoman, declined to comment on the ongoing investigation, she said the commission is continuing to hold hearings.

And some elected representatives of the affected areas in Astoria, Sunnyside, Long Island City and Woodside say Con Ed needs to prove its credibility.

"How can we feel confident at all when everyone responsible for the gross negligence last summer and the lies last summer are still in place?" said city Councilman Peter Vallone Jr. (D-Astoria).

"We need to reform how that company operates," said State Assemb. Michael Gianaris (D-Astoria), who has sponsored legislation calling for a review of Con Ed's exclusive license to provide electricity to the city.

Were the city to revoke Con



PHOTO BY ANNIE TRITT

Con Edison employee Alex Lopez does repair work in Long Island City last week.

The blackout's aftermath

174,000

Residents affected by the blackout in western Queens last July

9 Days

Time some were without power last July

\$7.5B

Cost of planned upgrade to system by 2011

17%

Proposed residential rate hike to fund improvements

Ed's franchise, Gianaris proposed an arrangement similar to that on Long Island, where "the wires and cables are owned by LIPA, but KeySpan operates the system," he said. "There's no reason that the Con Edison grid can't be operated by another utility."

Burke insists that the utility has "done everything I think you can do" in terms of improving the Long Island City electric network, where 10 of the network's 22 feeders that transmit energy to western Queens failed during the outage.

"We've made a lot of physical changes in the Long Island City area," he said.

Searching out weaknesses

Standing next to an open manhole in the hot pavement of a Long Island City street last week, Genaro Acevedo, a crew chief for Con Ed, signaled to his team to begin pulling 162 feet of old aluminum cable from ducts running under the asphalt.

A giant truck-mounted spool began turning, and like a braid of licorice, black cables slowly emerged from the 8-foot-deep

manhole.

"The aluminum, over time, disintegrates. Copper does not," said Ed Lugo, a Con Ed supervisor, as he explained why the still-functioning cables were being replaced with copper.

In the weeks following the blackout, Con Ed inspectors combed through the system to identify weaknesses in the grid, according to Katherine Boden, the utility's vice president of Manhattan electric operations, who oversaw the western Queens recovery effort.

By December, employees had replaced about 25 miles of cable and 125 transformers out of 500 miles of cable and the 1,200 transformers in the Long Island City network. Thirteen transformers had been damaged in the blackout, and most of the remainder suffered from corrosion, Boden said.

Con Ed also installed two additional feeders "in order to make the network slightly more reliable," Boden said.

A new substation in Sunnyside is scheduled to be completed by 2011, part of a planned \$7.5-billion upgrade to the entire system that Con Ed wants

to partly pay for through a possible rate increase. The proposed rate hike, which Con Ed estimates will increase residential bills 17 percent and business bills 10.7 percent, is now pending before the PSC.

Boden also highlighted a drastic change in how Con Ed gathers information on power outages. Because the city's electric meters are not built to transmit readings directly to the company, Con Ed has traditionally relied on notification from their customers for information about a possible outage, a method that obscured the true extent of last summer's blackout, utility officials said.

"We've learned that you can't always count on customers calling you to say they're out of service," Burke said.

So, with new computer equipment, the company is now combining information from emergency responders, meter readings and customer calls to locate power outages more efficiently. The data are collected on new electronic maps of the network, which are updated every 10 to 15 minutes. Viewing the new maps, Con Ed workers

can review the city's current power problems at a glance, Boden said.

And with a new integration of city census data into the programs, the utility is better able to estimate the number of affected customers during a future outage, and customers can be notified by an automated phone message, according to Boden. With the lessons learned from the Queens blackout, "we have developed a phenomenal operating system," she said.

Still, Boden said the best way to resolve an outage is to call in a report.

"A lot of people didn't call [during the blackout] because they see the trucks out there and they think Con Ed is aware of the problem," Boden said.

Residents fear repeat

While many residents interviewed acknowledged Con Ed now maintains a robust presence in western Queens as 20 crews continue to update the infrastructure, they still fear a repeat of July 2006.

"This is going to be an ongoing thing for years and years," said Teddy Passelis, one of the owners of Grand Cafe in Astoria. He said his restaurant lost \$60,000 during the blackout, including food spoilage, the cost of renting a generator, two burnt-out refrigerators, and several dead exotic fish in a tank that is part of the bar's backdrop. Under Con Ed's reimbursement policy for affected businesses, Passelis said he received \$7,000 for his losses, but is suing Con Ed for more compensation.

The spokeswoman for Western Queens Power for the People Campaign, a community group formed last July to hold Con Ed accountable for the blackout, said she considered the agency "disingenuous."

"They're telling us that it will take all this time and money [to fix the network], but they're also telling us that it will be done in a year," said Alice Tufel, who is also a Sunnyside resident and lost power for about five days during the blackout. "If it's easy, then why wasn't it done before?"

The reality is that the grid is huge, largely hidden underground and in need of constant upkeep, and sometimes problems will stop the flow of power, a ConEd representative said.

"In any electrical system, there will always be outages," said spokesman Alfonso Quiroz. "The idea is to be ready and to be able to respond to whatever can occur, and keep the outages short in duration and few in number."