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Letters



Outage sparks call for change

BY TRACY SEELYE
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 07, 2011 02:22 PM



It took seven days, but power was finally restored to all National Grid customers by Sunday, Sept. 4. It may take longer for the utility to restore consumer confidence in them after the delays and frustrations involved in the process.

A resident of Winter Street in Hanson nailed his disgust to a tree — placing large signs visible in both directions to count off the days without power, along with an off-color acronym questioning what the problem was.

“They fixed 1,500 people in one day, but they can’t take care of that [last] 500?” echoed Harvey Circle resident Laura Perkins. “I’ve talked to everybody, and every time I call there’s a different story.”

Not a day went by last week that someone wasn’t driving out to the Hanson Public Library and Multi-Service Senior Center to see if either had power restored yet.

A National Grid damage assessment official stopping at the location Friday said the problem was a transformer on Maquan Street that fed power through underground lines to the two facilities.

Still, Hanson Board of Selectmen Chairman Stephen Amico chose to stress the positive, focusing on the quick response by the town’s public safety departments and acknowledged National Grid was in a tough position — neither defending nor bashing the company’s response.

“I have to stress how proud I am of Hanson’s police, fire, highway and water departments,” said Amico, who has also expressed that sentiment in person to each department. “Dispatchers also did a wonderful job in getting help out to people.”

Some of those town employees, dispatched to help others, had tree damage at home, he said, adding that a tour of the town with Fire Chief Jerome Thompson early Monday morning gave him graphic evidence of the scope of the problem.

“I was really shocked at the damage,” he said. “It almost looked like we had a tornado or microburst. In some cases

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National Grid may have dropped the ball, but they had arranged for coverage from other states. Too much happened too fast.”

That was not a convincing argument to Whitman Emergency Management Director and Fire Chief Timothy Grenno.

“We knew the storm was coming, we prepared all weekend for it,” Grenno said. “We had Alabama and Kansas trucks in here in town eventually. But what they can’t say is there wasn’t enough time to prepare for it and plan for it. We did — we came through it.”

State legislators are also making their voices heard on the issue, and Amico said it is possible Hanson selectmen may end up discussing it as well.

“Unbelievable,” is how state Rep. Daniel Webster, R-Pembroke, put it. “Every time we go through something like this, the utilities promise to do better and nothing changes.”

He also pointed to National Grid CEO Ellen Smith’s Thursday, Aug. 25 departure for an out-of-state vacation, while the utility’s union employees were ordered to cancel personal plans for storm standby, as an indication of where the company’s priorities went awry. Smith has defended her vacation and said her absence in no way affected the company’s response.

Webster said he was signing on to a proposal by state Rep. Daniel Winslow, R-Norfolk, to require two days’ rebate on energy bills for every day of a large-scale power outage. Webster has also requested a hearing of the Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities and Energy into the response to the outages.

“The weak link for us was National Grid,” Grenno said. “It was NStar for the towns under NStar.”

But state Rep. Geoffrey Diehl, R-Whitman, who also signed on a letter requesting a hearing, is “holding off on cosponsoring any legislative initiative regarding rebates or penalties related to National Grid’s response until we have had a chance to hear from the company.”

At the same time, Diehl hastened to point out that he shares his constituents’ concerns.

“For the most part, people have been pretty understanding,” he said. “But there were several situations where people had health-related equipment that requires power and needed immediate assistance.”

Both Diehl and Webster took part in daily conference calls with National Grid officials and department heads — and relayed critical situations they received calls about requiring immediate attention.

Those conference calls with utilities and state emergency officials were also a daily responsibility for Grenno.

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"It's nothing that we haven't done here before," Grenno said. "It's what our job is, to deal with that stuff. ... Our issue with the utility company is something we'll deal with through the DPU (Department of Public Utilities) and try to make sure it doesn't happen again — we can't guarantee it."

Grenno said he may also bring up the issue of National Grid's response at the Selectmen's meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 13. Grenno also would like to hear feedback from the public as to how the emergency notification system worked in advance of the storm and urged people to register for CodeRED emergency notifications from the Plymouth County Sheriff's Department. The system will ensure emergency communications when landline and cable-linked phone service

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is out.

“There were promises made by National Grid for different levels of service on our end, meaning Whitman Fire-Rescue, as to what was going to go on, which just didn’t happen,” he said citing the utility’s pledge of tree crews and vehicles. “That really got confusing when you tried to get a National Grid crew and you couldn’t get anybody.”

Amico said a National Grid manager he knows on a professional basis gave him a glimpse of the company’s point of view.

“A lot of the problem in some towns is that town tree departments are unionized and National Grid, which no longer has tree cutters, had to wait for the union town employees to come to work,” Amico said. He stressed that was not a problem in Hanson, but acknowledged there was some uncertainty as to whose responsibility some trees were to remove.

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