

Michigan: Meeting on power outages exposes DTE Energy negligence

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1 October 2011

At a September 28 special city council meeting, residents of the Detroit suburb of Ferndale heard a report by representatives of DTE Energy regarding recent power outages. The ensuing discussion pointed to the systemic neglect of basic electrical infrastructure by the regional gas and electric monopoly.

The meeting was called in the wake of a spate of power outages in the city. The most recent loss of power occurred on September 6 after storms swept the area. That outage forced the cancellation of the first day of classes at Ferndale public schools.

Another, larger outage occurred last July in the middle of a heat wave. That power failure lasted several days, at its height affecting more than 6,000 DTE customers.

Ferndale Mayor Dave Coulter called the meeting in response to complaints from residents and small business owners, frustrated by the repeated and prolonged blackouts affecting wide areas of the city. The power outages have endangered the health and safety of thousands of residents and caused untold economic losses to small business owners.

Two DTE representatives addressed the meeting. Despite their attempts to cover up responsibility, their remarks pointed to gross negligence by the power monopoly, which has not replaced ancient power lines and equipment or carried out routine maintenance in a timely manner.

The problems in Ferndale are not an isolated occurrence. DTE energy, which made \$630 million in profit last year, is notorious for its neglect of the electrical power infrastructure, particularly in working class communities. Widespread power outages occur whenever there is even moderately severe weather. In September 2010, downed power lines caused by strong winds led to a firestorm that raged through a wide area

of Detroit, destroying scores of homes.

Opening the meeting, Mayor Coulter said he wanted to give DTE an opportunity to address the widespread “perception” among city residents that the utility’s infrastructure is antiquated. DTE sent two representatives, an engineer and a regional manager, who gave short presentations on the July outage.

The presentation by the DTE representatives was technical, designed more to confuse than explain. According to DTE Engineer Ron Gerken, the initial failure resulted from a faulty breaker at one of four substations serving Ferndale. That later forced a general shutdown of power to the area.

Under questioning by city council members it emerged that the substation where the initial circuit failure occurred dates back to 1952. In fact, it is the newest in the area. The other three substations date back to 1927, 1929 and 1947. “We have some cable still in the ground put in in 1918,” the DTE engineer finally admitted. “We have miles of cables older than the 1940s.”

Asked directly by council members if the repeated outages in the city were related to the age of the equipment being used, the DTE representatives refused to give a straight answer. “Things do wear out,” one lamely replied.

In the course of the questioning, it further emerged that there was no redundancy built into the electrical grid, which means that if one substation fails, there is not enough capacity at peak periods to carry the increased load.

In relation to the routine loss of power during storms due to tree branches falling on power lines, the DTE officials admitted there had been no tree-top maintenance in the city since 2002, nearly a decade.

The DTE representatives offered no apology or

compensation to city residents. Instead they presented a toothless “reliability improvement plan” promising more inspections and line maintenance. They said the company would “look into” building a new substation in Ferndale to relieve the overloading, a process they claimed would take years.

In the public comment period, Ferndale residents angrily confronted the DTE representatives over losses they have suffered due to the repeated outages.

Bonnie Peal, a 12-year resident of Ferndale, commented on the July outage, “The power wasn’t off three days, it was technically four.

“A couple of weeks ago, there was a young man profiled who was an employee of the lighting department in the city of Detroit—you are talking about the cable systems dating back to 1918—this particular young man was down under a manhole correcting something, and he almost suffered a fatality. The news went into a little bit of detail about some of the cabling systems under the manhole covers that, because of their age, are a threat to the public.

“You say they are inspected. But something dating back as far as 1918, I think we should be concerned about that that.

“I wrote a letter to Channel 2, the mayor, yourselves, regarding a press release saying DTE would replace a person’s food. What the press release said didn’t happen. As it appeared on television, if you lost power, if you lost work, contact DTE and you will be reimbursed. That was a lie.”

Another resident added, “To me this meeting is not bringing in additional information. I am a diabetic. I store insulin in the refrigerator. When the electricity went out we had to run around trying to get the food safe.

“DTE said the electricity was off two days. It wasn’t. It was off almost a whole week.

“Engineers are supposed to know what they are talking about. God does his work, but for us to lose power on the same Saturday twice doesn’t make any sense. I didn’t learn any more than I already know.

“I like Ferndale. But I can’t take losing medicine and food like that. There are a lot of people that live in my apartment. Someone needs to do something. I can’t take this anymore.”

Louie Sieracki spoke to the WSWS following the meeting, “I think it was like talking to a tree. I lost

everything, my condiments, everything in my refrigerator. I am on food stamps and receiving SSI [Social Security disability].”

Speaking of the July power outage, he added, “That was no act of God. There was no storm. It was equipment failure.” When he put in a claim for damages, he added, “They gave me a disclaimer, saying basically that they are not liable unless they come in and electrocute you in your house.”

“BS,” said Larry Alder, explaining what he thought of the presentation by DTE officials. “They did admit they had problems with faulty equipment that shorted.”

He said he ran a small camera repair business out of his home and lost three days’ work because of the outage last July, which cost him \$300 in lost business. He pointed to a general deterioration of conditions in the area. “They don’t have proper buses. Half the fire engines aren’t running. Ten years ago, that same station blew up and we were without power for three or four days.”



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