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Andrew J. Spano
County Executive

October 18, 2006

Ms. Jaclyn A. Brillig
Secretary
New York State Public Service Commission
Three Empire State Plaza
Albany, NY 12223-1350

Re: Case 06-M-1078

Dear Ms. Brillig:

I was unable to attend the Public Service Commission's hearings in Westchester County on October 11 and 12 and ask that you please accept these comments in lieu of testimony regarding the recent major power outages in Con Edison's service territory in Westchester County.

Thousands of Westchester residents and businesses have lost power – many on several occasions – over the past few months. These major interruptions in service, each lasting several days and in some cases a week, were more than just an inconvenience. Many families and businesses lost hundreds of dollars in spoiled food and were displaced from their homes as well. I am asking on their behalf for the Con Ed system to change. Simply placing blame does not accomplish anything. Change is the remedy we need. We need solutions to Con Edison's service delivery problems and Con Ed's communication problems, and those solutions need to be identified and implemented immediately.

On September 5, I wrote to Governor Pataki to request an independent performance assessment of Con Edison's preparedness and response to the three major storms that hit Westchester this summer, especially Tropical Storm Ernesto. As you know, Ernesto caused widespread damage throughout the Con Edison service territory, affecting over 90,000 residential and business customers in Westchester County alone. On September 12, I reiterated my request for an independent audit in a letter to Public Service Commission Chairman William Flynn. Specifically, I requested that the audit include an assessment of 1) How Con Edison's infrastructure, specifically in Westchester, compares to that of other utilities that have overhead wiring and poles when it comes to redundancy and strength, 2) The "best practices" utilized by utilities throughout the nation a) to prevent weather-related power outages, b) to restore power in a more timely manner and c) whether Con Edison is incorporating any of them into their own operating and management systems, and 3) The "best practices" used by utilities to communicate with customers before, during and after power outages, and once again, which, if any, of these practices are being used by Con Edison.

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Additionally, as part of the scope of work, I requested 1) that provisions be made for the consultant to meet directly with me and my staff in order to learn first hand what the County experienced during the extensive outage, and 2) that the consultant conduct a public meeting in Westchester to listen to the concerns of our residents as they pertain to Con Ed's emergency preparedness, response and restoration of power.

While I am aware that an independent assessment will be performed, I have not yet received a response from Chairman Flynn, and I ask you to assist me in seeing that these requests are addressed.

Once again, I am looking for a culture of change at Con Edison and the Public Service Commission. I believe this new mindset must also be supported at the highest levels of state government. Let me cite just one example. I have referred herein to the need to improve customer communications by examining the "best practices" of other utilities throughout the nation.

I have learned that both Florida Power and Light and Georgia Power have in place comprehensive customer service systems that have done much to ease the stress and anxiety associated with a power failure. This largely automated system walks customers through the process of reporting an outage in a customer-friendly and easy to follow manner. After reporting an outage to the automated system, the customer immediately learns if their problem is part of a larger area outage and if so, learns the extent and cause of the problem and is given an estimated time of restoration. All in one phone call. This is followed by another message stating that the customer will receive follow up calls periodically to advise them of the progress of the work order. It then confirms the customer's phone number. Finally, the system calls the customer with updates when the work crew arrives at the site and to advise that power has been restored. It also gives the customer an opportunity to speak to a representative if his or her power has not in fact been restored.

Let's compare that with what some Westchester residents have experienced with Con Ed. One Mamaroneck resident told us that he waited on the line for 25 minutes to report that his power had gone out. The Con Ed employee he spoke to was not able to tell him anything about the cause of the outage in his particular area, told him Con Ed had no idea when power would be restored and sounded annoyed with him for calling. When he got off the phone he said to himself, "Is this why I'm paying the highest rates for power in the country...there has to be a better way to do this." He was not the only person in Westchester County to have this kind of experience.

I see no reason why Con Ed's customer relations/communications system cannot be changed to a system that is being used in Atlanta, Georgia or Broward County, Florida by two totally different utilities. It should be the first change they make.

This is just one example of the kinds of practices that I believe Con Edison and the PSC should be implementing here in New York. This is not rocket science—it is simply modern technology. I am sure, that with minimal effort, other "best practices" could be found which address emergency response planning and preparation, redundancy in infrastructure, refund processes and practices, resource allocation, etc.

Similarly, I would like to understand why when the Long Island Power Authority experienced more extensive outages on Long Island during the same Labor Day Weekend storm that hit Westchester, that utility managed to restore their customers in approximately 24 hours. Again, what practices are LIPA using in emergency response preparation that Con Ed is not?

The major interruptions in power service experienced by Con Edison customers this year have made the need for change abundantly clear. I am hopeful that the recent public hearings and independent audit of Con Ed's performance will help us down that path.

Thank you for the opportunity to convey my concerns to you.

Sincerely,



Andrew J. Spano
County Executive

Cc: Honorable William Flynn, Chairman, NYS Public Service Commission
Honorable Members, Westchester County State Delegation