



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR
Pete Harckham

Harckham, Local Officials and Residents Speak Out on Poor Response to Storm Outages

PETE HARCKHAM August 21, 2020

| ISSUE: **POWER OUTAGES, DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SERVICE, NEW YORK STATE PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION, STORM RESPONSE**



Peekskill, NY – New York State Senator Pete Harckham voiced his frustration and anger to state utility oversight officials and utility representatives at a public hearing hosted by the State Legislature to address the emergency storm response and customer communication by utilities in the metro New York City region and Hudson Valley in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Isaias.

For the day-long hearing, during which he spoke three separate times as a participating member of three different standing Senate Committees (Energy and Telecommunications, Environmental Conservation and Local Government), Harckham drew on his daily meetings

following the storm with elected officials and updates from the utilities, along with staff reports of the hundreds of complaints and comments from residents. Power and communications outages from downed wires lasted in some part of the 40th Senate District for more than a week, and a number of residents are still without electricity and communication services.

Harckham also entered into the record a letter, signed by 22 town and village leaders, that castigated Altice USA, Inc., corporate parent of Optimum, the cable TV, phone and internet provider, for its poor response to storm outages and poor communications with customers whose service was affected by the storm.

While addressing Department of Public Service officials and the chair of the New York State Public Service Commission during the hearing, Harckham explained that after so many storm-related problems with utilities, residents no longer give any credibility to the state and elected officials who oversee the utilities.

“There have been hearings, there have been letters, there have been reports...there are stacks of plans, there have been table-top drills, and the only thing that changes is both these utilities (Con Ed and NYSEG) get worse every storm,” Harckham said at the hearing. “They forget the lessons learned about make-safe crews and communication, both with municipalities and within their own companies, (about) critical infrastructure, and on and on.”

Harckham added that “wholesale reformation of the business model and real systemic changes in the way that the utilities plan for storms, their incident command structure (and their communication” were needed to restore credibility. Later, he expressed anger and dismay to Con Ed officials in regard to the utility’s storm response, which he characterized as “dreadful.”

“You may have met 90 or 95 percent of your (outage response) benchmarks when you wanted to, but in my district that was thousands of families and thousands of customers without service and adequate communication,” commented Harckham to a Con Ed executive. Later, Harckham thanked NYSEG President Carl Taylor for monitoring power restoration “on the ground” and maintaining close personal contact with officials during the clean-up from the storm.

Infuriated by the slow response to the outages, Harckham called on August 9 for a formal Senate hearing on the failure of electrical utilities and communications providers to prepare adequately for a powerful storm, and their slow response to power outages. He also co-sponsored legislation to ensure that cell phone providers equip their towers and equipment with backup power sources so vital communications can get through when power is out.

Additionally, with power and telecommunications out for several days, an unreasonable span of time, Harckham said customers should be compensated for all of their losses, and co-sponsored a bill that requires the utility companies to do so.

The communities within the 40th Senate District were hit hard by Tropical Storm Isaias, and the damage from gusts upwards of 75 miles per hour was severe in some places. Local officials spent days trying to help residents and get answers to simple questions about power restoration and availability of water and ice for residents without electricity.

Yorktown Town Supervisor Matt Slater said, “Sadly this is not the first time our community has been part of this type of deliberation. These are no longer 100-year storms. We are seeing them more frequently with greater force, and we need our electrical grid infrastructure to be ready for it. Yorktown residents have heard enough talk and want action other than rate hikes. I thank Senator Harckham for inviting me to participate in today’s hearing.”

“At every stage from storm preparation to response, the decisions that Con Edison made were driven by profit motives—the desire to maximize returns for shareholders—and not by any sense of duty of responsibility to protect the health and safety of its customers,” said Ivy A. Pool, Supervisor of the Town of New Castle. “Con Edison’s profit-driven mentality was most clearly reflected in their approach to customer relations; they effectively outsourced customer service to under-resourced local governments like New Castle.

Added Pool, “If Con Edison is to retain its license to operate, the Public Service Corporation must demand substantive changes. Fines and fees are a mere slap on the wrist, and we have seen that they do little to compel the kind of substantial change that we are demanding today.”

Further, Harckham conducted a survey of both English- and Spanish-speaking residents in the 40th Senate District between August 10 and August 19, which drew a total of 786 responses. Two-thirds responded they were Con Ed customers, and the other third were NYSEG customers. Over 570 responded that they were without power for three days or more,

and over 50 stated they'd lost electricity for more than a week.