STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION AND

NEW HAMPSHIRE HOMELAND SECURITY

& EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

April 21, 2009 - 7:03 p.m.
New London Town Offices
375 Main Street
New London, New Hampshire

RE: DECEMBER 2008 ICE STORM REVIEW
Hearing to receive public statements.

PRESENT: Chairman Thomas B. Getz, Presiding (NHPUC)
Commissioner Graham J. Morrison (NHPUC)
Commissioner Clifton C. Below (NHPUC)
Asst. Director Kathy Doutt (HS&EM)

ALSO PRESENT: Reptg. the New Hampshire PUC Staff:
Randall Knepper, Director - Safety Division
Michael Sisto - Consumer Affairs Division

Reptg. Residential Ratepayers:
Kenneth E. Traum, Asst. Consumer Advocate
Office of Consumer Advocate

Reptg. NH Homeland Security & Emergency Mgt.:
James C. Van Dongen, Public Information Off.

Court Reporter: Steven E. Patnaude, LCR No. 52
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PUBLIC STATEMENTS BY:

Jessie Levine

Selectman Mark Kaplan

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CHAIRMAN GETZ: Well, good evening, everyone. I'm going to open this public statement hearing with respect to the December 2008 ice storm. There's a couple of people who are on their way, Commissioner Below and Assistant Director Doutt from Emergency Management. But they have heard my introductory remarks before, so I think we can move ahead without them.

My name is Tom Getz. I'm the Chairman of the Public Utilities Commission, on my left is Commissioner Graham Morrison. In the front row is Jim Van Dongen from Emergency Management. And, also from our Consumer Affairs Division, in the front, is Mike Sisto, and from the Consumer Advocate is Ken Traum.

The public statement hearing this evening is a joint effort by the Public Utilities Commission and Emergency Management as part of our after action review of the ice storm, which will review the preparedness and response both of public utilities and State government to the ice storm that began on the evening of December 11, affected approximately 60 percent of New Hampshire customers at its peak, and resulted in some customers going without service for as long as two weeks. In very general terms, an after action review is
focused on analyzing what happened, why it happened, and how we could be better prepared in the future.

In order to effectively analyze what happened, we have begun by systematically gathering data, and that effort started during the ice storm with the records and notes kept by the various individuals involved in responding to the ice storm. In addition, the Public Utilities Commission has submitted over 400 requests for information and requests for documents to the various utilities, and received answers from the utilities. And, the questions and answers are available on our website at www.puc.nh.gov. On that website, you can also see information and reports that have been filed by the utilities themselves, which will be part of our review process. We've also posted a comment form on our website for public input, that asks specific questions about the ice storm. And, we've posted over 150 of those forms so far as well.

The hearing tonight, and the nine others that have been scheduled around the state, are another part of the information-gathering effort. And, we expect that hearing your experiences during the ice storm and your recommendations for corrective measures will help us both in identifying issues and deciding on specific

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courses of action. Your analysis of what went wrong and what went right, and your recommendations about how things can be changed for the better, are critical inputs to the process.

And, I'll note also, in addition to this effort, that the Division of Homeland Security & Emergency Management have been taking a number of steps since the ice storm. And, Emergency Management has held a series of meetings with local public safety and community officials around the state. And, Emergency Management has also initiated a review process for State agencies. And, Assistant Director Doutt will describe that shortly.

One other effort that will occur this spring concerns the issue of undergrounding utility lines. Chairman Naida Kaen, of the House Science, Technology & Energy Committee, will be holding an informational session in her committee to better understand the potential costs and benefits of undergrounding utility services, and she will also be taking a look at issues related to utilities instituting automated outage management systems.

As we collect what is, obviously, a large amount of information, we will be analyzing the data to identify issues that need attention and remediation. And, while it's not our intention to prejudge anything, I
think there is no serious debate that communications on
many levels must be improved. And, that is why the Public
Utilities Commission Safety Division Director,
Mr. Knepper, is also facilitating a review of utility
communications practices. This effort is underway, and
will include communications to the PUC, to the State
Emergency Management, to local Emergency Management
Directors, and to the public generally. And, the goal of
this effort is to identify model practices that should be
adopted by all utilities in advance of next winter.

At the same time, there are other issues
that require a closer look before we can come to any
definitive conclusions. In general terms, we will be
looking at whether the utilities were reasonably prepared
and whether they responded reasonably. But, within that
framework, we will be looking at particular issues, which
include, among other things, the effect of tree-trimming
on customer outages, the status of mutual aid arrangements
among utilities, protocols for prioritizing restoration,
and decisions on allocating work crews. Depending on what
emerges, the Public Utilities Commission can proceed in a
number of directions, including change protocols for the
utilities, instituting rulemakings, and instituting formal
adjudicative proceedings to address specific issues.

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To assist us in our review, both because of the sheer amount of data that must be sorted and analyzed, and because there may be certain subjects that require specialized expertise, we have engaged a consultant to assistance us in this undertaking.

Now, as I noted earlier, we have not reached any specific conclusions at this point, and that is because our job is to take an objective look at all of the facts, but I can assure you we will follow the information we receive wherever it leads. And, we have a couple of goals in mind through the process. First, is we intend to issue a report in September that will set forth the results of the after action review, including recommendations for specific proceedings that may be required as a follow-up. And, another is to make sure that the utilities have improved their planning and response protocols, especially as it concerns communications, for next winter.

So, with those introductory remarks, I will turn to Assistant Director Doutt from Emergency Management.

ASST. DIRECTOR DOUTT: Thank you, Commissioners Getz. And, I apologize for the disruption of coming in a few minutes late. As the Commissioner {December Ice Storm Hearing @ New London  04-21-09}
said, we, at Homeland Security & Emergency Management, have undertaken a huge effort to also collect data on various response issues relative to the December ice storm. As you are aware, the storm impacted the whole State of New Hampshire. And, we received a Presidential Disaster Declaration because of that. We've reached out to our customers. In fact, this is my second trip to New London. The local responders and the EMDs, State agencies, and other responding organizations, the news media, through Jim Van Dongen, who is here with us, and several business sector groups requesting their after action reports, their input, and other information to help us assess the massive response and to develop an improvement plan for future responses.

And, I'd like to say at this time, publicly I'd like to thank Jessie and her team. I think you have some really creative individuals, and they did a great job during this particular disaster. In fact, we think that some of the things that your team did are model practices, and we're taking them to the Emergency Conference this summer and bringing them up, so other towns can learn if they have some of the resources that you have within this town, and it worked so very, very well.

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The emergency response to the ice storm was a massive operation at all levels. At the State EOC, we dealt with the largest acquisition and distribution of resources, such as water, MREs, shelter equipment, and generators for community infrastructure in our memory, as we tried to fill the requests from towns and anticipate future needs. Fifty-nine (59) shelters were stood up in the towns and regions across the state, housing over 1,500 people early on in the incident. At the same time, we had had a planning cell that was dealing with sheltering even more people, up to 10,000, to include people with medical and functional needs. We also, for the first time, had 17 pet-friendly shelters throughout the state. And, that in itself is a very good thing. We know that people, many people will not evacuate if they cannot bring their pets with them.

However, with all of this, we shouldn't forget that we also had four fatalities that were related to the storm, and over 200 injuries, almost all related to carbon monoxide poisoning. And, throughout this evening, if there are any of you who feel uncomfortable stating what you need to state in this public setting and want to speak to me afterwards, I will remain for a few minutes and be able to you. Thank you very much.

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CHAIRMAN GETZ: Thank you. So, if there's anyone who would like to speak tonight, make a public statement?

MS. LEVINE: Okay. Thank you. Jessie Levine. I'm the Town Administrator in New London. And, I appreciate your comments. We did have a great team. And, despite the troubles, the storm event certainly united us. And, we're working on improving from there. But Commissioner Getz and I have already spoken and Sue Blothenburg and I have already spoken. Our prime -- The biggest difficulty we had was communication with PSNH. And, I'm sure you heard that at your other hearings. I know that this is not a new item. I appreciate that you're setting some protocols in place.

Certainly, Sue did her best to communicate with us. It was the level of information that we received that we didn't have anything to pass onto the people who were contacting us, coming to the shelter, you know, just wanted some kind of accurate information. And, there was a caller, I think he was a fire chief from the Seacoast, during one of the state daily teleconferences, who said "Even if they had a truck, one truck in town, that would give people the hope that, you know, there was an entourage behind them." I think that that, even though
it may not have been, you know, an effective use of resources, I think there is some truth to that. That people felt that there wasn't even any hope, because we didn't have anything to really tell them, and there wasn't a sign that progress was being made here. And, you know, this, to New London residents, here is what mattered. It really didn't matter what was going on in Peterborough. And, it didn't matter, you know, I think people knew that, in the '98 ice storm, I wasn't here, but Mark Kaplan, my Selectman, was here, I think people knew that at that point New London was really one of the focal points in the state, and so all the eyes were here. And, in this ice storm, you know, there were 200 communities going through it, so it was a little more of trying to share.

But the communication with the utilities is really the biggest issue. We also lost cable. And, so, the reliance on the Web EOC, you know, within 24 hours we didn't have that access as well, and that was an issue, which we discussed at the hearing in, whenever that was, in March.

So, thank you for coming here tonight. I'm sorry to relocate everybody and put you through that, but we did double book Whipple Hall. But this is a nice cozy space for this discussion anyway. So, thanks.

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CHAIRMAN GETZ: Thank you, Jessie.

SELECTMAN KAPLAN: Thank you. I'm Mark Kaplan. I'm a Selectman in town. And, again, I want to thank you for coming here and listening to us. As you are well aware, this past ice storm was not the first ice storm that New London has faced. And, having gone through it twice, my estimation is it's bound to happen again.

And, while people talk about the emergencies and the communications, and I think that's all to the good, and we should be better prepared. There's no question.

But I want to address my attention to how can everybody be better prepared to handle an ice storm. Because I believe that, whatever the climate change is taking place, for whatever reason, every five or ten years this is going to happen in this area in New Hampshire. We have trees, and the trees seem to be the major problem. And, I was very interested to hear you say that you were going to do a cost/benefit analysis, and that you were interested in doing the tree cutting.

What I would like to see you do is to charge Public Service with getting out the data. For example, they have said that the 14 day outage cost something like $70 million. Okay. Let us just take an extreme example. Supposing no tree, no branch ever fell
on any line. They should be able to tell you that "well, if we just went around and fixed the wires, it might only have been two days or three days or one day." But just think of the amount of money that would have been saved, and how much less of a problem. Because, if people are only out of power for a day or two, they somehow get by. It's when they're out for day after day after day that things really go wrong, and now you really need all kinds of help and all kinds of management, emergency stuff. People who might be able to get by one day, can't get by four days, and because they're ill and they're this or that or the next thing.

So, I think getting ready and trying to do that is vital. But I know you can't do it alone. They can't do it alone, you can can't do it alone, and it's going to take cooperation. And, it may take the Legislature to allow greater tree cutting than there was before. You know, but think about, if no tree ever fell, and if you charge them to find out what would have happened if no tree ever fell on a line, you would find out a huge, huge difference. And, they can do that. They have the facts, they have the figures, they can get it out for you. And, with cooperation, I think that you can do a lot to save.

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For example, PUC may say "well, why don't we just charge everybody who has a line 25 cents more, 50 cents more a month." It's not a lot of money, 50 cents more a month is only a few dollars a year. But think, they have almost 500,000 customers, 50 cents a month, you know, is a lot of money. And, if this storm only -- if this type of storm only happens once every five or ten years, they can cut down an awful lot of trees, so that, in the fifth year or the tenth year, you know, it's just an ordinary storm. They go out and fix some lines, and everybody goes on about their business. Anyway, I give it to you for food for thought. And, I somehow recognize this young man over here. I've seen him before and I can't quite place him. What is your name?

CMSR. BELOW: You know me. Clifton Below.

SELECTMAN KAPLAN: Now I remember you. Exactly. Okay, now I know who you are. Good to see you again.

CMSR. BELOW: And, good to see you.

CHAIRMAN GETZ: Yes, let's keep that conversation off the record, I think.

Okay. Is there anyone else who would like to speak this evening?
(No verbal response)

CHAIRMAN GETZ: Okay. Well, --

SELECTMAN KAPLAN: Oh, I have one thing to add. Yes. It suddenly occurred to me. There are, in terms of cutting trees down, there are some people who are going to say to you "This tree in my front yard has been there for 80 years. And, I grew up with this tree. And, I don't want you to cut this tree down." And, you're going to say "Well, wait a minute. Wait a minute. PUC is going to come in and they're going to say "it will hit the lines." Well, it's okay. You have a choice. We'll put in two guy wires, and the tree won't fall on the lines, and you don't have to cut the tree down."

In other words, I think that, if there's some cooperation between the various input here, you can really accomplish an awful lot of good, and it wouldn't cost everybody an awful lot of money. Everybody pays a little bit.

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN GETZ: Thank you. All right.

Then, if there's no one else, then we will close the hearing. And, then, you know, please, if you're interested in following up, there's a lot of information that is going to be online in the meantime, and then we'll...
issue our report in September. So, thank you, everyone.

SELECTMAN KAPLAN: Thank you.

(Whereupon the hearing ended at 7:20 p.m.)