

REGION'S BEST-READ NEWSPAPER

# Chicago Sun-Times

35¢

Chicago/Suburbs  
50¢ Elsewhere  
For home delivery  
1-888-848-4637

www.suntimes.com

WARM Pages 2, 36

TUESDAY, AUGUST 17, 1999

Sports Final

New area  
codes in  
waiting

Page 45



Dixie Chicks  
get ready  
to 'Fly'

Page 31

SUMMER  
BUCKS  
Win \$1,000, Page 23



# City to ComEd: Faster

BY CHARLES NICODEMUS  
LAFR REPORTER

A "massive" crash inspection of Commonwealth Edison's distribution system identified 1 problems—27 in Chicago—that could have led to blackouts, but the city said the company's weekend review wasn't good enough. "They need to put in that level of effort every day for two years to get their Chicago operation back in shape," said William

## Probe turns up 41 problems

Abolt, commissioner of the Department of the Environment, which oversees ComEd's city performance. That was the message Abolt said he'd deliver to top ComEd executives today, when they come to his office to explain how

they're speeding up plans to upgrade the utility's ailing electrical distribution and transmission systems in Chicago. ComEd also will detail how it plans to give the city more advance notice of potential severe problems like the blackout that

stunned the South Loop area with little warning Thursday, a company spokesman said.

That power failure, and the mysterious, same-day blackout that hit west of the river, enraged Mayor Daley and prompted the crash inspection. About 700 ComEd employees were dispatched to scrutinize equipment in 428 substations and more than 1,300 manholes in the utility's northern Illinois. Turn to next page

# Utility to detail plan to city

Continued from previous page

service area.

The problems included transformers leaking oil, cables that showed signs of stress, transformers with ailing fans and circuit breakers, tree branches that threatened substation equipment, and back-up batteries used for emergency power equipment that weren't properly recharging.

The utility wouldn't disclose the locations of the trouble spots or the number of businesses and homes that might have been blacked out if the problems went undetected.

Twenty-six problem sites found this weekend, including 16 in Chicago, were fixed over the weekend, while 15—including 11 in the city—were still undergoing repairs, said David Helwig, the ComEd senior vice president brought in from the utility's nuclear group. Others problems still are being found, a ComEd spokeswoman said.

"There are no insurmountable problems" in fixing the utility's troubled Chicago infrastructure, Helwig said. But he said ComEd needed to react to the current crisis not just quickly but deliberately, with "organized, purposeful efforts."

Abolt made clear he wants something more. "They took their eye off the ball on transmission and distribution, and now they've got to spend hundreds of millions of dollars . . . to fix things," he said.

Meanwhile, the Illinois Commerce Commission, meeting here today, was expected to give quick approval to a staff recommendation for an intensive investigation of ComEd's current problems and what led to them.

## Suburbs have been battling ComEd for years

By CARLOS SADOVI  
SUBURBAN REPORTER

When the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus gathers next Wednesday for its quarterly meeting, many of the 200 mayors in the six-county area will gripe about Commonwealth Edison's poor performance this year.

While most of the electric company's problems this summer have been confined to Chicago, suburban officials say they've been fighting the same problems for years.

"I think they are not only [Chicago's] problems, I think they're systemwide problems," said Robert Lahey, executive director of the West Central Municipal Conference.

Arlington Heights, Evanston, Elmhurst, Highland Park, Orland Park and Rolling Meadows are a few of the dozens of communities that have grappled with power failures.

To improve its reliability in the suburbs, the utility and the mayors group are finalizing an agreement calling on the electric company

to make \$1.1 billion in capital improvements in suburban communities over the next three years, said David Bennett, executive director of the Northwest Municipal Conference.

Evanston was so fed up with its power failures that it almost stripped the electric company of its franchise agreement, said Roger Crum, Evanston's city manager. The city council voted in July to allow the utility to continue serving Evanston if it promised to make major improvements.

In west suburban Elmhurst, hundreds of customers complained about failures caused by power lines and equipment that sometimes were about 50 years old, said state Rep. Dan Cronin (R-Elmhurst).

After residents griped to ComEd officials for nearly a year, crews finally began to respond, Cronin said.

ComEd spokesman Keith Bromery said the utility has been working to find problem areas.

Focus of the inquiry would be the Thursday failures, blackouts earlier last week in the Bucktown area, and an end-of-July power collapse in and west of Wrigleyville that knocked out service to more than 100,000 customers.

While city and state regulators are scowling at ComEd, the weatherman is smiling on the utility. Temperatures that were supposed to climb into the 90s remained in the low 80s, and the week's forecast was for more of the same.