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ComEd humbled by fiery explosion

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TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

Just hours after Commonwealth Edison's boss boasted about improved performance this summer, an explosion in a transformer vault knocked out power to three downtown buildings and created a scene reminiscent of last year's Loop blackout.

The fire was apparently sparked when contractors hired by ComEd were breaking up a sidewalk over the vault, and city officials said that this incident, unlike the summer of 1999's string of failures, was more an accident than a symptom of old or shoddy equipment.

Mayor Richard Daley, who last summer declared that he was "fed up" with ComEd's performance, praised the utility Thursday for quickly applying its emergency plan. "It did work," Daley said. "I want to compliment them."

Still, the event could not have more dramatically illustrated a caveat ComEd CEO John Rowe had included in his "End of Summer Progress Report" just hours earlier: "We still have a long way to go to improve reliability and regain the confidence of our customers."

The utility is halfway through a \$1.9 billion infrastructure improvement program, launched last year after a series of summer blackouts showed how timeworn, overloaded and vulnerable the system had become. Ironically, the repair work that led to Thursday's fire and blackout was part of that very rebuilding effort.

That most consequential—though hardly the longest—blackout occurred in August 1999, when a transformer overheated, leaving the Loop in the dark and lighting a fire under Rowe, who has since replaced 49 of the company's executives and set out to restore the viability of the utility's infrastructure.

For thousands of workers, a situation similar to the '99 Loop blackout unfolded Thursday—though on a

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Fire: Three Loop high-rises lose power after a transformer fire ignites during repairs to ComEd's equipment.

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smaller scale—as lights flickered, blinked, then went out entirely.

Many also heard accompanying explosions as sparks and flames shot from the sidewalk on Dearborn Street near Wacker Drive.

Early on, firefighters saw that the flames were perilously close to a 26-inch gas main, and they began spraying fire-snuffing foam on the line as well as the flames, officials said. The "foam task force" was called in from O'Hare International Airport as backup.

Employees inside the closest building, 55 W. Wacker Drive, were evacuated. "The whole building was coming down one stairwell," said Carol Barnes, a paralegal at the Dowd & Dowd law firm, on the building's 10th floor.

At one point in the afternoon, city officials believed that an electrical shutdown also would come to City Hall, and elevators were shut down to prevent anyone from being trapped inside. Some supervisors permitted workers to go home, but the outage never occurred.

Ultimately, three buildings—55 W. Wacker, 30 N. Clark St. and 39 N. LaSalle St.—lost power for a time as a result of the fire.

Dan Hintz, a state worker on his lunch break, was across the street when he saw white and green flashes start shooting from the construction site.

"It was small at first, you could barely see it," Hintz said. "There was a ton of explosions. The guy in front of us ran. . . . Then you started seeing orange flames, it was at least 10 feet high."

Some businesses told their employees to get out. Hundreds of office workers and curious onlookers lined Wacker Drive as the dark smoke poured from the vault. Bike courier David Russom, 26, was riding on Wacker when he saw the fire.

"Flames were shooting to at least the third floor," he said. "It was billowing up."

No injuries were reported.

Fire Commissioner James Joyce said the fire broke out as a crew worked on a project to replace a sidewalk that also serves as the top of a vault that surrounds four ComEd transformers. Workers had

installed a temporary structure of plywood and two-by-fours below the sidewalk to protect the transformers as they worked, Joyce said.

It appeared that debris may somehow have fallen onto the transformer below, officials said.

The work was being done for the utility by C&M Contractors, said Pam Strobel, ComEd senior vice president. C&M has worked on 20 to 25 projects for the company over the last three years, "all without incident," Strobel said.

Joyce, like Daley, had praise for ComEd's response.

"We had full cooperation from the highest level of Edison," the fire commissioner said. "At no time were we unsure of what Edison was doing."

ComEd brought in generators on trailers at 4 p.m. to restore power to the LaSalle and Clark Street buildings as well as nearby traffic lights. ComEd officials expected power to be restored to 55 W. Wacker by noon Friday.

Although the lights blazed inside Cole Taylor Bank at Washington and Clark Streets, a handwritten sign on the locked doors informed customers: "Temporary emergency closing due to power shutoff."

ComEd asked nearby office buildings to conserve electricity while crews brought in generators to fully restore power until a new transformer could be installed, ComEd spokesman Don Kirchoffner said. Power at the Daley Center was cut to 50 percent as a precautionary measure.

Thursday morning, a sanguine and confident Rowe had told reporters that the utility had "made substantial progress in every area."

The 1999 miscues "embarrassed the hell out of us," said Rowe, chairman and chief executive officer of ComEd corporate parent Unicom Corp.

Changes since then are already paying dividends, Rowe said: In the summer of 2000, outages were down 19 percent at ComEd compared with the previous summer, and the duration of such blackouts was shorter by 25 percent.

"Obviously," the CEO acknowledged, "we weren't tested as severe-

Fire damages four transformers

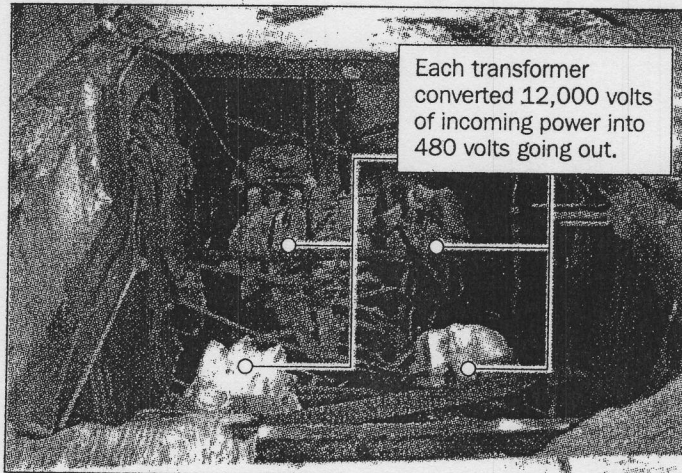
A fire in an underground electrical vault on Dearborn Street snarled downtown traffic on Thursday afternoon and left three buildings without power. ComEd crews were reinforcing the vault's concrete roof when the fire started. Power at 222 N. Dearborn is expected to be restored by Friday; portable generators restored power to the two other Loop buildings.



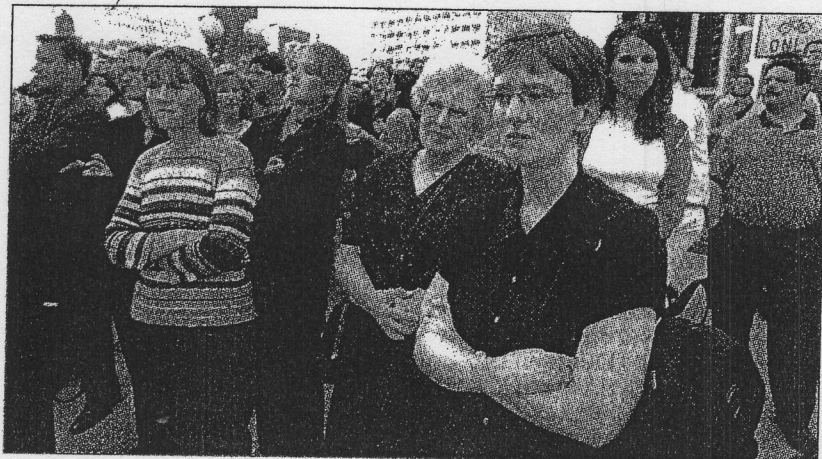
Source: ComEd

Inside the underground vault

The vault is beneath the sidewalk on the east side of the building at 222 N. Dearborn. The fire in the 12-by-34-foot vault damaged four transformers, which are used to "step down"—or convert—high-voltage power into lower-voltage power.



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Tribune photo by Chuck Berman

Workers evacuated from the building at 55 W. Wacker Drive, including Bridget McInnes (from left), Erin Murphy, Joy Carlton and Carol Barnes, watch as firefighters battle a transformer fire.

ly this year as we were last summer." In 1999, a series of heat waves created repeated heavy surges in electrical demand, and those demand spikes laid bare the shortcomings in ComEd's system. In contrast, the summer now drawing to a close was cool by historical standards.

Since the revamping program began, he stressed, the management team at ComEd's transmission and distribution group has been "gutted

and rebuilt from the ground up." To date, the company has inspected about 5,000 miles of overhead transmission lines, inspected its underground distribution system, and carried out extensive improvements in key Chicago substations.

In fact, Rowe disclosed Thursday morning, ComEd has found more things to fix than it originally expected, and is throwing an additional \$400 million into what had originally been a \$1.5 billion repair ini-

tiative. The problems weren't centered in one area, but instead showed up "across the system," said an official.

The extra bucks ComEd is shelling out to clean up its act won't come out of ratepayers' pockets, however. Unicom, which is in the process of merging with Philadelphia-based Peco Energy Co., has agreed not to raise residential rates for several years.

As part of its effort to soothe ruffled feathers at City Hall, ComEd earlier this year developed the "ComEd Commitment program" which pays \$60 to \$100 to customers who suffer extended or frequent service outages. In the past three months, the new program has handed out \$611,560 to 9,472 eligible customers. If the new program had been in place last summer, the utility noted, ComEd would have paid out \$8.6 million to 118,521 customers.

Thursday morning, before the Loop fire smeared the sky with gray smoke, Rowe was asked what the mayor's office thought of ComEd's progress. Relations have improved, he said, adding with a laugh: "Of course, it would be political suicide to give us a public endorsement."

Tribune staff writers Mickey Cio-kajlo, Ruth E. Igoe and Gary Washburn contributed to this report.