

PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
1333 H STREET, N.W., 2nd FLOOR, WEST TOWER
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005

ORDER

December 3, 2003

FORMAL CASE NO. 1026, IN THE MATTER OF THE INVESTIGATION OF THE
FEASIBILITY OF REMOVING PRE-EXISTING ABOVEGROUND UTILITY LINES
AND CABLES, AND RELOCATING THEM UNDERGROUND IN THE DISTRICT OF
COLUMBIA, Order No. 12993

I. INTRODUCTION

1. By this Order, the Public Service Commission of the District of Columbia ("Commission") opens an investigation to examine the feasibility of removing aboveground utility lines and cables and relocating them underground. The public shall be given an opportunity to propose issues and comment at the time and manner to be determined by the Commission.

II. BACKGROUND

2. The Commission has received informal inquiries from government agencies, certain community groups, and individual members of the public raising concerns about aboveground utility lines and cables.¹ For example, Maria Tyler, Commissioner for the Foggy Bottom and West End Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC 2A), has complained that the poles and lines in her neighborhood were unsightly.² She has suggested that inasmuch as the D.C. Department of Public Works was planning to rehabilitate the alleys in the Snows Court and Hunter Mews neighborhoods, a cost-efficient alternative for the utility companies would be to move current aboveground lines and cables underground.³ The D.C. Department of Transportation ("DOT") has also suggested exploring the possibility of opening a joint Commission/DOT proceeding to address the community's concerns.

3. The powerful thunderstorms that struck the District of Columbia in late August and the arrival of Hurricane Isabel in September both brought widespread destruction to the area, including the downing of numerous aboveground power lines. Many utility customers were

¹ Letter from Maria Tyler, Commissioner, ANC-2A, to Commission Chairman, (October 2, 2001) ("ANC Letter").

² ANC Letter at 1.

³ *Id.* at 2.

without electric power for days, some for more than an entire week.⁴ The widespread and prolonged power outages once again raises the issue of whether utility lines should be placed underground to prevent, or at least, mitigate future power outages.⁵

III. DECISION

4. Because of the expense to individuals and businesses from prolonged power outages caused by recent storms, the Commission believes it is appropriate to determine whether, in some circumstances, tolerating short-term high costs may be worth the long-term benefits of having fewer power outages.⁶ Traditionally, the capital cost of burying power lines would be more expensive than overhead lines which receive more complaints from citizens relating to the safety and aesthetics of the aboveground lines. Given the governmental and public interest concerning this issue, the Commission finds that a formal investigation is warranted.

THEREFORE, IT IS ORDERED THAT:

5. The Commission Secretary shall open a formal investigation consistent with this Order.

A TRUE COPY:

BY DIRECTION OF THE COMMISSION:

CHIEF CLERK


SANFORD M. SPEIGHT
ACTING COMMISSION SECRETARY

⁴ See e.g., Matthew Mosk and Christian Davenport, *Swift-Moving Storm Leaves Record Outages*, Washington Post, September 20, 2003, at A1.

⁵ See e.g., Editorial, *Blaming PEPCO*, Washington Post, September 27, 2003, at A24: "It may be time as well for the commissions to start thinking more broadly about the costs and benefits of burying power lines. Although the price for both PEPCO and local consumers would be high, it might be worth it in the long term if it meant less economic damage in the wake of storms." See also Matthew Mosk, Peter Behr and Christian Davenport, *Utilities Held Down Spending on Upkeep; Regulators Didn't Order Upgrades Before Isabel*, Washington Post, October 17, 2003, at A1.

⁶ See *id.*