



The City of New York

# Manhattan Community Board 1

Catherine McVay Hughes CHAIRPERSON | Noah Pfefferblit DISTRICT MANAGER

New York City Council Committee on Consumer Affairs jointly with  
The Committee on Lower Manhattan Redevelopment and the Committee on Technology

## Oversight Hearing on Emergency Planning and Management During and After the Storm: Assessing and Improving Public Utility Risk Mitigation Measures

Testimony by Catherine McVay Hughes  
Chair

January 18, 2013, 1:00 p.m.  
Council Chambers at City Hall

Good afternoon, Chairpersons Garodnick, Chin and Cabrera. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Emergency Planning and Management During and After the Storm: Assessing and Improving Public Utility Risk Mitigation Measures. I am Catherine McVay Hughes, Chair of Manhattan Community Board One (CB1).

**We are now approaching the third month since Monday, October 29, 2012** when 14 foot storm surges from Superstorm Sandy arrived on our shores from the East and Hudson Rivers. Most of Lower Manhattan's utility infrastructure, including electrical, steam, phone and data services, were lost.

**The loss of utilities severely disrupted residents and business located in CB1 and other parts of Lower Manhattan.** When we lost electricity there was no running water, which meant no flushing toilets, no showers, no dishwashers, no washing machines, and no dishwashing. Without electricity, elevators do not work and the majority of residential buildings in CB1 are high-rises. When we lost steam there was no heat and no hot water.

Electricity was restored to most customers within five days, late on November 2, but many residents and workers went additional days or weeks without basic necessities. Restarting large steam systems is complicated and causes additional delays. Steam supplies some very large residential complexes in our district, such as Southbridge Towers in the South Street Seaport area with 1,651 units, where steam heat was not restored until late Friday, November 9.

**Lack of phone and data services in particular prevented many businesses, both large and small, from operating during this time.** Many residents and businesses are still relying on alternative voice and data services while Verizon installs a fiber optics system.

We appreciate efforts made by Con Edison and Verizon to restore service for electricity, steam, voice and data service, in the days and weeks since Sandy. Both of these companies suffered extensive damage to their facilities: Verizon suffered damage at their headquarters at 140 West Street and their major switching center at 104 Broad Street; Con Edison sustained damage at their East 14<sup>th</sup> Street Station and additionally substations. We appreciate efforts made by Verizon

to respond to individual problems that we brought to their attention in our effort to help our constituents resume their daily lives and work.

Con Edison worked extremely well with CB1 and the Downtown Alliance. It was particularly helpful immediately after the storm that they included the CB1 Chair in their daily conference call updates with elected officials. Con Edison's map of electricity outages was very helpful, and we recommend that they develop one for steam outages as well. We hope that in the event of a future emergency, Verizon will also include us in calls and provide similar maps.

We were informed on January 8, 2013, at a meeting convened by the Lower Manhattan Construction Command Center, that only a handful of buildings in our district remain uninhabited as a result of storm damage, indicating the substantial progress made since the storm which left almost all of Manhattan south of 27<sup>th</sup> Street without electricity.

Government at the city, state and federal levels should work with utility companies and other stakeholders to strengthen infrastructure to better withstand future emergencies such as 14 foot storm surges. CB1 has prepared a report called Emergency Preparedness Lessons Learned from Superstorm Sandy, which has incorporated input from all of our committees and will be adopted by our full board next week. Steps that should be taken should include the following:

1. **Assess whether strategies were successfully implemented in Battery Park City that can be applied to new development elsewhere** and to older infrastructure through retrofitting. Recently built infrastructure in Battery Park City fared significantly better than older infrastructure in other parts of the district. Electricity was restored in parts of Battery Park City days earlier than in the rest of the district.
2. **Implement a change in zoning regulations to allow developers, whether in the process of building or retrofitting, to install infrastructure in "flood zone-safe" locations without incurring a floor area penalty.** A majority of buildings in CB1 house mechanical infrastructure in basements and sub-basements to maximize floor area ratio for the primary function of the building. Basements in Zone A and beyond were inundated by Superstorm Sandy and some buildings still remain without utilities due to damage from flooding. This problem affected Con Edison and Verizon, contributing to a widespread loss of service.
3. **Develop circuit redundancy for all utility companies** so that if one system is damaged another can replace it. The use of solar panels to back up traffic lights and wastewater treatment plants should also be considered. The loss of electricity caused traffic lights not to work which became dangerous when vehicular traffic increased downtown. Back-up batteries would not have lasted for the five days that power was out.
4. **Make steam-powered buildings and infrastructure more resistant to storm surge and resilient when service is disrupted.** This is important because steam proved vulnerable to salt damage following Superstorm Sandy. We recognize the importance of this from direct experience as our CB1 office was among buildings that were affected and our staff worked without heat for an additional five days after Con Edison restored electrical service for a total of two business weeks.

5. **All utility companies must take steps to secure infrastructure so that it can withstand 14-foot storm surges and salt water.** We acknowledge the importance in particular of Verizon's efforts to expedite a move from copper wire to a fiber optic system that will better withstand damage from storms and other emergencies.
6. **Our constituents have expressed concern about cost increases for data services due to the conversion to fiber from copper.** Phone rates are regulated by the state and will not be affected but phone and data are sometimes packaged together and Verizon customers are concerned that their bills will increase if they use both. Verizon should be sensitive to these concerns and produce clear information about the reasons for the change and the benefits from it.
7. **Utility companies must develop ways to communicate with customers throughout emergencies and the restoration process** to provide information about the status of repairs, service restorations and timetables. Con Edison's efforts to communicate through automated telephone calls were limited in their effectiveness when phone and electrical service were inoperative. Utility companies should make use of commonly used social media platforms for updates that are effective even when electricity and phone service are lost.
8. **Utility companies should proactively reimburse customers for outages instead of billing for them and issuing rebates only when customers request them.**
9. **Plans should be in place for the use of generators and other emergency equipment when electricity is lost.** The placement of generators and the noise and exhaust they emit resulted in numerous complaints to CB1. Generators should not be located near air intake for residential buildings or playgrounds and should not be used to turn on lights and equipment not being used in buildings.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We look forward to working with you to make Lower Manhattan as resilient as possible.