

Our Dangerous Electricity Infrastructure

by Laura Forlano

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The deaths of two Con Edison workers, who were severely burned in a manhole explosion in late June, came just five months after a woman walking her dog on East 11th Street was killed by electric voltage coming from a metal plate on the street.

These are just the most tragic incidents involving the city's electricity infrastructure, according to Mark Williams, business agent for Local 1-2, the Utility Workers Union of America, who cites a series of manhole explosions and underground fires, one of which forced several buildings in a Brooklyn neighborhood to be evacuated due to high levels of carbon monoxide. Last year, there were 4,602 manhole incidents according to the Fire Department, reportedly a surge from just 2,100 such problems in 2002.

Why do these dangerous incidents occur?

"Con Edison does not invest resources in its overhead and underground infrastructure," Williams charges. "It tells union workers to cut corners and rush through jobs."

A report by New York City's chief lawyer to the State Public Service Commission, as explained in the [New York Times](#), found that there are currently 5,700 street lights and signals waiting to be fixed, which reportedly cause dangerous "stray voltage." On average, the report found that Con Edison took two and a half years to repair broken street lights, and, often, they are fixed with temporary solutions, which make the problem worse.

For its part, Con Edison says the problem of stray voltage is as much the city's fault as its own; the city has the responsibility for inspecting broken street lights. The company also says it is in fact spending a total of [\\$700 million](#) in 2004 to improve the city's electricity infrastructure and meet high demand during summer months. The improvements include the construction of new substations, the installation of miles of new cables and the replacement of equipment damaged on September 11.

Testimony at a recent City Council hearing maintained that the problem is the poor maintenance and lack of inspection of the city's electrical infrastructure. In addition, it is difficult to track problems and complaints because calls to 311 are passed on directly to Con Edison, making it hard for the city to know whether problems are resolved. Susan Stetzer, a representative of Community Board 3 Manhattan -- the district in which the woman walking her dog, Jodi Lane, was killed -- said that, despite several calls to 311, a recent problem in the neighborhood went unresolved for weeks. When she called to follow up she found that the complaint had been completely lost.

At a February 12 hearing, which followed the death of Jodi Lane, the City Council's Transportation Committee was shocked to learn that neither the New York State Public Service Commission nor the City Department of Transportation regularly conducts inspections of the electrical infrastructure. In fact, the only time inspectors are dispatched is when a serious injury or fatality occurs. Con Edison also admitted that it does not routinely inspect its equipment.

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Currently, the City Council's Transportation Committee has proposed a law which would require annual inspections, and periodic written reports to the council itself. The law would also require that underground and street-level electrical equipment be covered with non-conductive protective casing.

The proposed law has received widespread support by community leaders and public officials who say that it will make the city safer.

Such a law, though, would impose additional costs both on the New York City Department of Transportation and on Con Edison. That is one reason Con Edison opposes the law.

Over the past 10 years, Con Edison has reduced electric rates seven times, though their own costs have risen. During the same period, electricity use has grown by 20 percent and the company has spent \$4.5 billion in upgrades and expansion.

So in April, Con Edison filed a request to increase electricity rates by an average of 6.7 percent beginning in April 2005 when the current rate agreement with the Public Service Commission expires. The increase would amount to about \$5.40 for a typical residential customer and would affect the company's 3.1 million customers in New York City and Westchester County. According to Con Edison, the increase is necessary in order to raise a needed \$550 million for future upgrades.

"We will be making some of the largest investments in our energy infrastructure that have been seen in decades," said Joan S. Freilich, executive vice president and chief financial officer of Con Edison. "We understand that no one likes to hear about increasing costs and how they impact monthly expenses, but the increases we are requesting will make possible the system upgrades necessary to provide the reliable and safe delivery of electricity required by the nearly nine million people we serve."

Over the next year, the Public Service Commission will hear from consumer groups, environmental organizations and elected officials on whether to approve the company's rate increase. During this time, the commission will take the company's safety record and the vital need for infrastructure upgrades into consideration.

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