

The 2006 Blackout - “ Too Easy Just To Blame Con Edison

by Marcus Banks

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Though the mayor’s aides saw them as rude, the [Queens politicians](#) who rolled their eyes behind the mayor’s back in the middle of last month’s blackout may actually have been reacting more civilly than most people from western Queens would have done, given the circumstances. Mayor Michael Bloomberg was holding a press conference in which he said that Con Edison and its chief executive officer, Kevin Burke, deserve our thanks.

It would be difficult to find any New Yorker who has been feeling that way lately. (Even the mayor has changed the way he talks about the utility.) First, there was the 10-day blackout in Western Queens – which is home to some of the city’s largest power plants -- that shut electrical power for perhaps 100,000 people. Then, as soon as power was restored in Queens, a series of substantial power outages began on Staten Island.

A few days later, Bloomberg declared a heat emergency for New York City, and on the third day of 100-degree weather, the strains on the electrical system were clear. There were scattered outages in all five boroughs (as well as throughout the region) and Con Edison reduced electrical loads in particular in Midtown and the East Side, sending workers door to door to encourage area businesses to conserve energy. Con Ed also reduced voltage in all of Brooklyn and Queens, and began to power its own headquarters with a generator rather than from the grid.

As of this writing, assuming that no widespread blackouts occur in the next few days, it is clear that Con Edison did a much better job of mitigating risks to the power supply in August than it did in July.

What is less easy for sweltering New Yorkers to admit is that Con Edison can only shoulder part of the blame for what’s been happening.

Why the July Blackout Happened, and Why August Was Better

Although residents of western Queens may not agree with this assessment, New York City has one of the nation’s best electrical systems. Indeed, Con Ed won an award in 2002 for being one of the eight [most reliable utilities in North America](#) .

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Approximately 70 percent of the system’s wiring is underground, and thus is less vulnerable to many [severe weather conditions](#) . The system is designed so that [other cables can pick up the slack](#) whenever a cable fails.

The 2006 blackout is not easily compared to the 2003 blackout, which was a cascading international event that [affected the entire city](#) . A closer parallel to the 2006 Queens blackout is the 1999 blackout that affected Inwood and Washington Heights in Manhattan. That only went on for about 30 hours — enough time for then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to [sue Con Ed](#)

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During the 1999 blackout, Con Ed realized that so many cables had failed that there were not enough left to handle the load. The utility decided to shut down the entire system for Inwood and Washington Heights temporarily, reasoning that this would lead to less disruption in the long run. Con Ed did not make the same decision in Queens, and the result was much [misery](#) . Once the August heat emergency hit—particularly on August 3—Con Ed took preventative measures just as it had in 1999, and again avoided widespread blackouts.

The lesson seems clear, but Con Ed is hesitant to acknowledge it. On August 2 the utility released its first report about the Queens blackout. It offers the most detailed chronology to date of what occurred during those days, but does not address the underlying causes. Con Ed’s CEO, president and chairman Kevin M. Burke says that that analysis will take a “ [couple of months](#)” to complete

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Political Fallout of Queens Blackout

Charitably put, Burke’s refusal to provide a definitive cause for what happened in Queens reflects his deliberative nature as an electrical engineer. Even granting this, it is another sign of Con Ed’s tone deafness about this entire event.

In addition to the frustration of being without power, the extremely low initial estimate of affected residents infuriated people in Queens. Con Ed originally claimed that around 2,000 customers (or 8,000 people) lost power. The more than ten-fold increase offered later, coupled with a refusal by Burke to state definitively when power would be restored, only stoked the outrage. Con Ed did expedite the process for claiming reimbursement for food spoilage, which can be up to [\\$350 for households and \\$7,000 for businesses](#) . But otherwise, their public relations has

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been disastrous.

It strains credulity that only around 2,000 customers would be affected by a blackout that hindered a major airport. Although it is possible that Con Edison deliberately deflated the estimate—thereby risking the scorn it now faces—the more likely explanation is that it simply does not know how to measure its customers.

The “rule of thumb” that 1 customer = 4 people is merely a guess. There does not appear to be any scientific technique for measuring how many people utilize particular portions of the electrical grid. Because Con Edison insists on framing estimates in terms of the number of customers rather than of the total population affected, it inevitably looks disingenuous.

Another flaw in Con Ed’s approach is relying on the complaints it receives by phone as its primary measurement of the extent of damage. What about the people whose only phone is powered by electricity? What about the fact that many people probably did not call because they assumed somebody else had called already? When Con Ed conducted a block-by-block canvas on day four of the blackout--something that could have happened on day two or even day one—it finally recognized the extent of the problem.

The comments of City Council member Eric N. Gioia effectively convey the outrage. During the crisis Gioia stated of [Burke](#) , “I think he has put lives at risk and potentially cost lives.” Both Gioia and state Assemblymember Michael N. Gianaris have called for Burke’s resignation, and grilled him during City Council and Assembly hearings on July 31 and August 3. US Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney has called for Con Edison to offer [much greater compensation](#) than \$7,000 for affected businesses. Finally, William M. Flynn, chairman of the State of New York’s Public Service Commission, has come close to accusing Con Edison of lying during their investigation of what happened. At the Assembly hearing, Flynn [stated](#) , “With every word that they give us from now on, we’re going to go back and verify for its veracity.”

Mayor Bloomberg was the one prominent defender of Con Edison during the crisis, to the great anger of Queens residents and politicians. He defended the utility against a chorus of complaints, and at one point even proclaimed, “I don’t think that I could have gone in and done any better.” It now appears that this was a strategic move to smooth relations with Con Ed while

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the crisis unfolded. Following Con Ed’s release of the chronology on August 2, Bloomberg [said](#) , “Am I satisfied? Of course not—we are going to find out what happened and what steps we can take to make sure it does not happen in the future.”

Long-Term Implications of the Blackout

Mayor Bloomberg should want to prevent any repeats of the Queens 2006 blackout. But the sobering reality is that this prolonged blackout may not be our last.

Con Edison deserves criticism for its decision not to temporarily halt power and prevent a prolonged power outage, and especially for its absurdly low estimate of affected New Yorkers. But the larger forces that brought about the blackout are beyond the control of any utility.

The months of January through June of 2006 were the warmest first half of the year in the continental United States [since 1895](#) . On July 17, the day the blackout began, New Yorkers joined many other Americans in coping with [oppressive heat](#) .

Add to the rising temperatures the fact that New York will experience significant population growth over the next 20 years. The extent of the growth is up for debate, but our population will definitely [increase](#) . More people and hotter days will inevitably lead to more blackouts, and also cause greater strains on other parts of the [city’s aging infrastructure](#) .

The long-term solution to maintaining a thriving city will require modernizing our infrastructure and reducing global warming. The first part of this equation is more directly within the control of New Yorkers, but we can act on both fronts.

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