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Testimony Regarding Utilities' Performance vis-à-vis Tropical Storm Irene

September 26, 2011

Good morning, Chairs, Ranking Members, and other distinguished members of the Energy and Technology, Labor and Public Employees, Planning and Development, and Public Safety Committees. Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the management of issues related to Tropical Storm Irene.

I represent the 143rd district, which includes most of Wilton and the eastern part of Norwalk. I am going to focus my remarks today on Wilton. Like New Canaan, Weston, Redding, Ridgefield, and Bethel, Wilton was one of the towns in our region that suffered the greatest impact from the storm due to factors including high concentrations of trees and large numbers of residents with well and septic systems.

As background, Wilton's landscape is very hilly with many pockets of wetlands, and covered with dense vegetation. Route 7 passes through the center of town, but most other roads are narrow and many are winding. Most are not lit at night. Only those properties on or very close to Route 7 have access to municipal water and sewer services. Most town facilities, community organizations, schools, and retail establishments are located on or near Route 7. Wilton is served by CL&P.

Approximately 81% of all Wilton households lost power as a result of Irene, and for many this meant loss of water as well. Many also lost telephone and cable service. The storm ended on Sunday, August 28, and the last resident without power had service restored very late on the night of Monday, September 5.

The Town of Wilton – our police and fire first responders, First Selectman, public works department, and CERT team – worked hard to open roads and accommodate and inform utility personnel. CL&P's local operations team was also diligent and responsive. Several community organizations (the Wilton Library, the Wilton YMCA, Trackside) opened their doors to offer showers, wi-fi, and air conditioning. All of these efforts were greatly appreciated by Wilton's residents, and I want to go on record with sincere thanks.

From the moment the storm ended until power was restored to the last remaining households, I was almost constantly receiving e-mails and calls (on my cell phone) from constituents seeking information. Most people understood the extent of the damage and that power restoration would be delayed, but they wanted reassurance that work was proceeding and that there was a logical plan in place. They were preoccupied by a single issue: lack of information. There were several reasons:

- During the first four days, until roughly Thursday, September 1, work crews of any type were sparse on our roads. People wondered whether any work was being done at all.
- Most residents were unable to reach a CL&P representative by phone during the 3-4 days after the storm. When they did, the representatives could not give them any information about work plans or any estimates about power restoration. Online requests did not yield restoration estimates during that time frame.
- When reached, CL&P personnel responded to customers in ways that made them more anxious. For example, "You are not a priority," or "We have no idea when your power will be restored," or "No one has told us anything" or "If you're not happy, check into a hotel".
- For the first few days, Wilton's emergency operations center (EOC) was also unable to provide concrete answers, because it was not receiving them from CL&P.
- Our legislative liaison at CL&P, who deserves real kudos for his responsiveness, was also unable to provide me with any clear answers during the first four days.

By the morning of Thursday, September 1, the situation in terms of information had dramatically improved. For the first time, both CL&P and the town (EOC) could announce where crews would be working that day. More crews were visible in several areas. Large numbers of residents began to have power restored. CL&P began to be able to explain how it was setting its priorities. It became possible to explain to people still waiting why they were waiting. Residents who had submitted online requests for restoration estimates began to receive them.

Even after the Thursday morning turning point, numerous issues surfaced:

- As CL&P began to send online restoration time estimates to customers, it became apparent that most were receiving a time of 11:30 pm, Tuesday, September 6. This must have been a worst case, and not intended to be a precise estimate. But nothing indicated that, and it was needlessly distressing for people.

- Residents of peripheral areas of Wilton were told either by CL&P or the EOC that they might be connected to circuits located in neighboring towns. In several cases, it took days to learn the truth and whether teams assigned to Wilton could help them.
- Many customers who had no power were told by CL&P that their power was on and that they were not scheduled for any repairs. In several cases, the EOC was aware of these problems, but could not get CL&P to change the information in its customer center about these sites.
- Customers who were disabled, ill, or elderly had difficulty reaching CL&P and many had to wait until the very last days for power restoration. Had they known it would take that long, they might have been able to make special arrangements.
- Local electricians were contacted with offers of training for certain types of line repair operations, but not until five or six days after the storm.
- Numerous businesses were unable to operate for several days and lost clients or income.

In hindsight, it would seem that:

- Adequate numbers of crews to make substantial progress on repairs were not available until Thursday. Most people reported having their power restored by crews from out of state.
- CL&P was not equipped or prepared to set town-specific priorities for several days after the storm.
- There were significant communication gaps between CL&P's management level and customer service team and the local representatives and crews working in Wilton.
- CL&P experienced a number of unexpected problems during the first few days, particularly in terms of the availability of out-of-state crews, but did not acknowledge them.

A number of actions could be helpful in future:

- Ensuring that ill, disabled, or elderly customers are registered or somehow identified by CL&P as needing rapid restoration during outages.
- Making sure that CL&P has, and makes available to towns, clear maps of which customers are located on which circuits.
- Improving the communication skills and requirements of customer service representatives.
- Contacting electricians, tree specialists, and other local professionals and providing them training for emergencies so that they can do contract work during outages.
- Improving communication between central CL&P offices and local operations teams.
- Improving availability and tracking of real-time outage information.
- Dramatically improving customer communication and making live, informed, trained representatives available during emergency situations.
- Providing a means for businesses to communicate efficiently with CL&P about their immediate operational needs during an outage.

Very generally, the type of comment I heard most frequently from residents was: "We are hostages to this situation, but if we at least knew what was going on, we would feel better and we could plan accordingly. Being told just to wait is demeaning." It is true that during the aftermath of the storm, the overall lack of information on work plans and status reports did made people feel very anxious and — in the case of many older, ill, or disabled individuals – desperate. It is unacceptable that people already experiencing physical distress should be left in a communication vacuum.

Finally, our utilities' call for a rate hike during the aftermath of the storm was most unfortunate, and it is no surprise that the reaction I heard from my constituents, who were in a situation of distress, was that this statement added insult to injury. The questions asked during last week's hearing about why, with the second-highest electricity costs in the country, customer service is not better in Connecticut, are appropriate. I would hope that this review will also provide answers to the many questions that remain about tree-trimming policies, overtime pay and shift assignment for utility workers, subcontracting policies, and overall customer communication.

On September 2, I submitted and published a letter to CL&P, with copies to many legislative colleagues and Governor Malloy, requesting a formal review of preparedness, response procedures, and communications protocols. So I am very pleased to see this process proceeding with seriousness and deliberation. This is not about blame, but about developing and implementing a full improvement program to ensure that our constituents are better served when future incidents occur.