

From: Robert Firmage <rfirmage@philosophy.utah.edu>
To: <jorchard@utah.gov>
Date: 1/8/04 3:57PM
Subject: Utah power debacle

Dear Julie,

As per your request, here is my written account of my concerns anent the Utah Power debacle. My wife and I live at 4599 Clearview St. in Holladay. We were without power for about 12 hours on Friday, Dec. 26 [from about 3:00 AM to 3:00 PM] and then again from about Noon on Saturday Dec. 27 to 2:00 PM on Tuesday Dec. 30. The first outage was general to most of Holladay; the second was specific to about eleven families on Clearview and Russell streets in Holladay. Judging from the nature of the second outage we all concluded that it was a failure of the transformer located behind my house, which trips regularly whenever there is more than a breeze, both summer and winter. Despite the assurances of many line repairmen that we need a new transformer and that they would requisition one, we have not seen any upgrades for over ten years [when the problems started occurring--the transformer itself is much older]. Sure enough, when a man finally showed up after three days and nights of cold and darkness, it took him about ten minutes to reset the transformer and then go about his merry way. What chapped us all, however, is that we had all been trying unsuccessfully for 72 hours to get in touch with some live person in Salt Lake City who would not treat us like idiots, and would have the authority to send a crew to check out whether we were right. It would have taken somebody perhaps an hour to drive to our neighborhood, check things out and solve the problem, saving several dozen people days of frustration, discomfort and expense.

There are thus two main thrusts to my criticism of the rather aptly named Scottish [i.e., "Stingy"] Power's policy concerning Utah customers, which I would like to preface with a general observation concerning the ethics of management of public utilities. The general principle is this: The primary responsibility of a public utility is always to its customers and never to its shareholders. Since it enjoys a monopoly, its customers have no recourse to other servers and will become its victims, should it decide to sacrifice their interests to private gain. When a policy of neglecting the power infrastructure in the interests of greater profits has resulted in the sort of breakdowns highlighted by the events of December 2003, it is the shareholders who must bear the brunt of the hardships to be occasioned by necessary upgrades. It is the duty of the PSC to protect the interests of the customers against the interests of management.

My first criticism seems to have already been conceded by Scottish Power and so I will simply reiterate it. The infrastructure in old growth neighborhoods must be upgraded. Had our transformer been up to grade, it is almost certain that we would have escaped the second outage. [There were no downed trees or branches anywhere along our line.] An adequate infrastructure would save all kinds of expenses in the future, but this kind of wisdom seems totally lacking in modern accountant-driven management policies.

My second criticism has to do with the paternalism, condescension and disregard evidenced toward customers by Scottish Power. We need to be able to break through the communications citadel they have purposely set up. We need, in periods of crisis, direct access to live people in the field, who live and are based in Utah, not in Oregon or Scotland. We need individuals who are directing the fieldwork to show up in the neighborhoods affected within a few hours of our calls, who will be able to tell us what is being done and who will listen and act on our own suggestions as to what the problem might be. I understand that a crew may be too busy to respond immediately, but individual representatives should be available to interface with the public. The most horrible part of our three days of cold and darkness was the sense that we could do nothing, that we were at the mercy of persons who acted like the little lord god--every bit as capricious and every bit as inaccessible. That is probably the main reason why there are so many people in this valley who are so completely incensed at Utah [or Scottish] Power. We are tired of their arrogance.

I hope that these remarks will prove of interest and use to you. I encourage the PSC in all its efforts in restoring adequate electrical service to the Salt Lake valley.

Sincerely,
Robert Firmage, PhD
Department of Philosophy
University of Utah