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Questions about electrical fires remain unanswered

2 years after blazes touched off in a number of Naperville area homes, ComEd has not released a report on the cause, which is being sought in a suit filed by a homeowner



Al and Joyce Brunsting outside their Naperville home Tuesday Aug. 30, 2011 that caught fire in December 2009 because of an electrical surge they say was caused by ComEd. (Michael Tercha, Chicago Tribune / October 23, 2011)

By **Julie Wernau**, Tribune reporter

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Joyce Brunsting awoke to the sound of loud buzzing and the stench of something burning and dialed 911.

When firefighters arrived, they discovered tiny explosions of electricity jumping from the electrical box in her basement and flames shooting from her electric meter. A transformer in her backyard was ablaze.

Across the street, Pam Pitock ran into her basement to turn off her electric power at the urging of a firefighter and found the wires above her electrical box glowing red; electrified water leaked from beneath her kitchen sink.

Siding at another neighbor's house was on fire, apparently ignited by an overheated electric meter.

Shortly after 6 a.m. on Dec. 17, 2009, calls of power failures and electrical odors began pouring into the Naperville Fire Department from the Century Hill neighborhood, an affluent collection of 300 homes in an unincorporated area on the city's northeast side near Lisle.

By 6:30 a.m., firefighters were on the scene, hoses at the ready, but they waited 45 minutes for Commonwealth Edison technicians to turn off electric power before they could douse fires. Two homes, including Brunsting's, were left uninhabitable, according to fire department reports.

Afterward, ComEd dispatched a dozen engineers to Brunsting's house, where they collected materials for lab analysis. Inspectors from the utility also checked electrical connections at 110 homes and, after prodding from the Century Hill Home Owners' Association, checked on more than 300 homes, said its president, Kelly Duffy-Bassett.

Yet two years later, the results of ComEd's investigation have not been made public. Instead, neighbors affected by the chaos and fires that day say the utility paid their insurance claims and held a neighborhood meeting two months later to discuss the fires but failed to answer critical questions.

ComEd claimed Friday that staffers at the Illinois Commerce Commission were informed of the incident by phone and provided technical briefings. The company, a spokeswoman said, didn't feel it was required to file a formal report. Tim Anderson, the ICC's executive director, said a formal report would have prompted an inquiry, as required by law.

A spokeswoman for ComEd, a unit of Chicago-based **Exelon Corp.** that serves 3.8 million customers in northern Illinois, said the company did not determine the incident's cause. The company, citing pending litigation, declined to provide the Tribune access to maintenance and inspection records of equipment serving the neighborhood.

The Brunstings, who say ComEd long ago stopped returning their phone calls, sued the utility in March, claiming its negligence in maintaining equipment is to blame for the fire that left them living in a hotel for six months while their home was repaired at a cost of \$120,000. The Brunstings are seeking less than \$30,000 to cover out-of-pocket expenses.

They also want ComEd's investigative report on the fires made public. If the investigation isn't disclosed, the Brunstings contend, there's nothing to guarantee something of the same magnitude happening elsewhere in the Chicago area.

"The homeowners, the ICC and everybody else would really like to see ComEd's report," said Stuart Brody, an attorney for the Brunstings.

The Illinois Public Utilities Act requires utilities to report accidents on its property or involving its equipment that "endanger the safety, health or property of any person" to the ICC, which regulates utilities. The ICC relies on ComEd to follow the law, said Anderson.

"To some extent, 'honor policy' would be one way to put it. But it would be extremely risky on their part not to. It's not like public accounts don't exist of this," Anderson said.

Anderson initially said the ICC didn't have enough information to decide if ComEd should have filed a report.

"We're two years away from it and didn't know anything about it, so we're trying to piece together accounts to learn whether it should have been reported to us," he said.

Prompted by questions from the Tribune, Anderson then called ComEd to ask about the incident. Anderson said the utility provided information but warned that if he discussed what he'd learned with a reporter, he would be vulnerable to being charged with a misdemeanor.

Specifically, he cited a statute that says: "Any officer or employee of the Commission who divulges any fact or information coming to his knowledge during the course of an inspection, examination or investigation of any account, record, memorandum, book or paper of a public utility, except in so far as he may be authorized by the Commission or by a circuit court, shall be guilty of a Class A misdemeanor."

On Wednesday, Anderson said he had determined that ComEd didn't have a responsibility to report the incident.

"Nevertheless, as with all information that we receive regarding incidents like this one, our staff reviews the information received and determines the need for follow-up," he said.

What little is known about the fires dribbled out at ComEd's neighborhood meeting. About 80 homeowners packed a meeting at the Southeast Alternative School to hear the utility's explanation.

Company officials said they never autopsied, or took apart, a cable that they said contributed to the fires, according to minutes of the meeting, which were approved by ComEd.

ComEd also said only one transformer, the equipment box that lowers the voltage coming into homes, was at fault, according to the minutes, which were obtained by the Tribune. Neighbors, however, claim there were incidents at homes supplied by electricity from other transformers. ComEd declined to comment on that information.

The impact of the 2009 incident was so widespread that even those whose homes had escaped fire spent thousands of dollars grounding and rewiring their homes, replacing electrical meters, digging trenches to repair underground lines or dealing with fried electrical sockets.

"There were fires on the outside of people's homes, meters blew up, pipes melted," said Duffy-Bassett. "ComEd told us it was this perfect storm that caused the loop of electricity into the Brunsting's house to break. They never would say it was a surge. They would say the equipment failed coming from the transformer."

Jenny Shaw considers herself one of the fortunate ones, with just \$1,000 of damage.

"The electrician said we were probably lucky," she said. "When they took out some of the stuff, it was melted."

Still, Shaw said, the incident was so frightening she wants assurance from ComEd that it can't happen again.

"I don't think they ever really explained quite what happened or what they've done to make sure it won't happen again," she said.

Carey Mossop, director of surge protection for Schneider Electric, a global energy-management company, isn't involved in investigating the incident but said if it was blamed on a transformer, routine checks should have alerted ComEd to problems.

Short of a traumatic event such as a lightning strike, transformers generally don't fail unexpectedly, said Mossop.

"Usually it doesn't happen boom, snap of the fingers," Mossop said. "Usually it happens over time."

If a connection is loose or corrosion is eating away at the lines in a transformer, a simple thermal scan will allow the utility to see any hot spots before the problem gets worse, he said.

By law, ComEd is responsible for ensuring that equipment is maintained and the electrical system is safe. The law leaves these issues to utilities to monitor but does require expenditure reports so the ICC can evaluate whether equipment is being maintained.

The year the fire broke out, the ICC expressed concerns about a downward trend in ComEd's safety and maintenance expenditures. That year the average age of transformers was 16, and the average age of substations was 32, the oldest they had been in years. Yet ComEd's outlays for transmission and distribution construction and maintenance totaled \$556 million, compared with \$813 million in 2006, \$841 million in 2007, \$702 million in 2008 and \$598 million in 2010, as measured in 1998 dollars.

Moreover, staffing levels were down 26 percent from a decade earlier, and with fewer people on the ground, the ICC was concerned about the effect on the electric system's reliability. The ICC also said it was concerned about the turnover rate for top management in charge of safety and reliability: Only one person since 1997 had held the position for two years or more.

In a statement Saturday, ComEd said the number of employees "in pertinent job classifications (since 2006) has largely remained consistent [constant?] despite a collapse in the economy." The company added that a consultant's report in 2010 noted "the overall adequacy of ComEd's workforce has been in harmony with its philosophy to perform work at least cost." ComEd said 2009 marked its "best reliability performance on record" and that investments geared to improve the system's reliability have increased 165 percent. On its website, ComEd says it has invested about \$4.7 billion since 2000 to "expand, upgrade, and maintain the reliability" of the electrical system.

The incident also alerted neighborhood residents to the fact many of their homes — some built in the 1970s — were grounded to water pipes rather than grounding rods.

As a result, electricity traveled along water pipes. At the home of Pam Pitock, her water lines became electrified just minutes after she readied her children for school. Smoke and water leaked from beneath

her kitchen sink. Pitock is thankful the firefighters told her to turn off her power, because at first she thought the smell of fire was only coming from the Brunsting's house.

"I firmly believe in my heart that if we had not been notified, our house would have gone," said Pitock, whose home sustained more than \$6,000 worth of damage, which ComEd paid.

Joyce Brunsting, a retired teacher, still recalls being in her robe and pajamas and grabbing a flashlight from the bathroom before shuffling downstairs to investigate where the buzzing sound and smell was coming from.

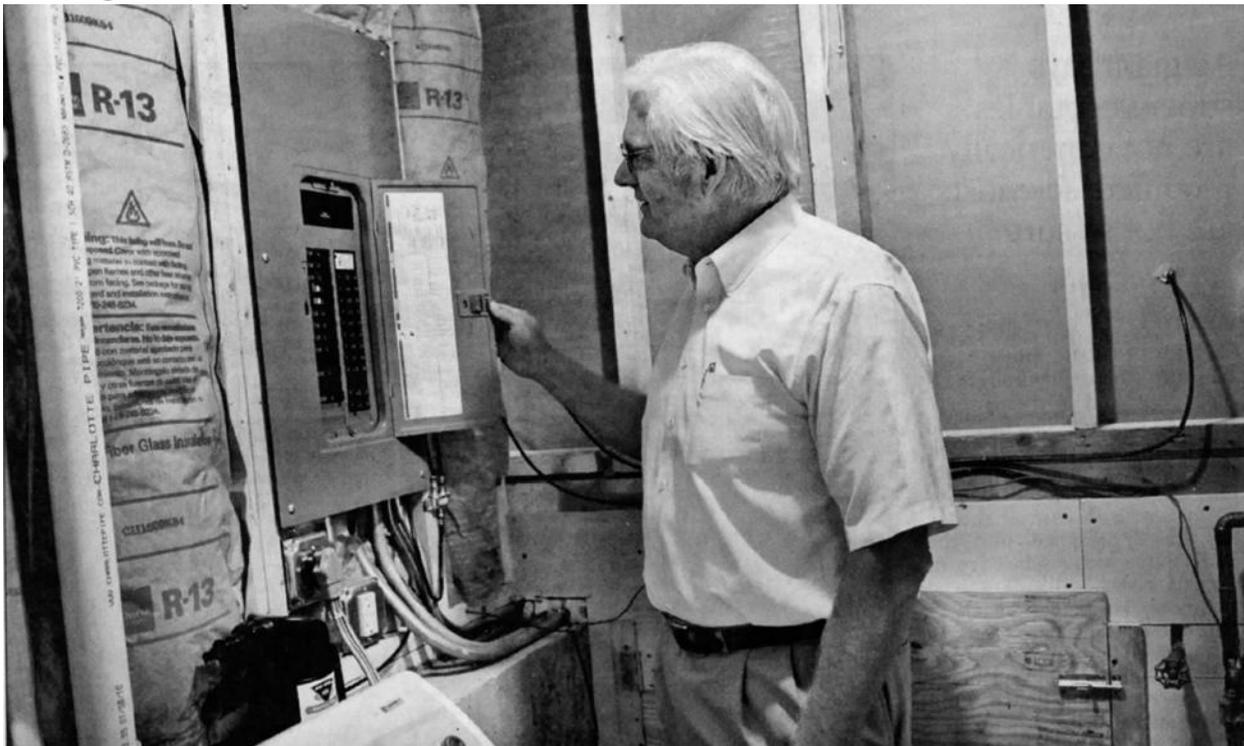
What if she hadn't awakened? As she sat in her car that day after evacuating her house, a firefighter told her if she not gotten up, she would have been killed in the fire. In her mind's replay of events that day, she's also grateful that she didn't tell firefighters to come without their sirens, as she had planned.

The sirens, she said, acted as an alarm to neighbors who were experiencing the same problems in their homes.

Her husband, Al, a retired physicist, said: "The main thing that we lost was peace of mind. A lot of people, myself included, go away for the weekend. Is your house going to be there when you come back?"

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Al Brunsting checks out the new electrical panel in his Naperville-area home. As part of a lawsuit he and his wife filed against ComEd, the couple have asked the court to order the utility to make public its investigative report on the 2009 fires that rocked their neighborhood.

How fire departments respond to electrical fires

Don Markowski, first vice president of the Illinois Fire Chiefs Association and chief in the Addison Fire District, said firefighters are no longer allowed to turn off electricity to a neighborhood in the case of an electrical fire. And until the power is off, they can't spray water on the flames, or they run the risk of electrocution.

"Routinely, we wait anywhere up to an hour, sometimes more, for Commonwealth Edison to come and turn the power off," he said.

Unlike firehouses, which are spaced within minutes of neighborhoods, the closest ComEd trucks available for dispatch can be many miles away. In the case of the Naperville incident, the closest dispatch point was more than a dozen miles away in Aurora.

How much voltage travels through those power lines

