

Veridian CEO talks lessons learned from ice storm

Pickering councillors call for better emergency communication

Pickering News Advertiser

PICKERING -- Better communication with customers and more accurate power restoration estimates are two of the areas Veridian wants to improve in the wake of the December ice storm.

President and CEO Michael Angemeer spoke to Pickering council on March 24, saying that an action plan is in the works with a final report expected in June.

Proposed improvements include using social media to get information to stakeholders faster, developing a web-based power outage map and educating the public on how the power restoration system works.

“The expectation is to do a better job on giving people estimates of when the power is going to be back on, especially when they’re in the early parts of the outage ... from the perspective of people making decisions about whether to stay in their homes or not,” the CEO said.

“We did a lot of good work fixing things, but maybe a little more effort on up-front assessment might give customers a better idea of when their power will be back on.”

Mr. Angemeer said the “evolving nature” of the ice storm presented unique challenges -- crews would restore power to an area only to have more tree branches fall, requiring the area to be restored again.

The ice storm restoration effort was the largest in Veridian’s history and cost about \$1 million.

If the Veridian board of directors gives the green light, the company will apply to the Ontario Energy Board for permission to recoup that cost -- likely through a surcharge paid by customers for about two years.

Several councillors raised concerns about communication at the March 24 meeting.



Pickering residents who were without power for six days after the ice storm are asking for accountability and compensation from Veridian. About a dozen frustrated residents attended the Jan. 20 meeting of Pickering council's executive committee.

Councillor Peter Rodrigues noted many residents likely weren't able to access the Internet once their devices ran out of battery and questioned why there wasn't more information from Veridian on the radio.

"We heard a lot of things about Toronto ...I heard nary a peep about Pickering," he said.

The CEO said Veridian information wasn't picked up by radio stations in the early days of the crisis.

The company will be reaching out to local radio stations and also looking into the possibility of "breaking into" stations with emergency broadcasts.

He said staff put 19 media releases up on the Veridian website, as well as tweeting information.

About 65,000 Veridian customers in Pickering, Ajax, Clarington and Port Hope were impacted by the ice storm, which represents more than 50 per cent of the customer base.

Mr. Angemeer stressed 90 per cent of those affected had power restored within 48 hours.

Those who weren't so lucky included residents of McBrady Crescent in Pickering, who were without power for six days, from Dec. 22 to 27.

Some likened the experience to living in a "war zone."

They have asked Veridian for compensation for spoiled food, hotel bills and other expenses incurred during the lengthy outage, as well as a report that looks specifically at what went wrong on their street.

"It is not acceptable not to have power for six days," said McBrady Crescent resident Dragos Nita at the March 24 meeting. "You pay for a service and you have an expectation."

He asked why Veridian, which makes millions in annual revenue, couldn't spend more on restoration if it meant getting everyone's lights back on faster.

"If they spent, let's say \$2 million, maybe we could have had power like the other 90 per cent of Pickering, in two days," Mr. Nita noted.

Mr. Angemeer said in his 28-year career in the industry, he has never heard of a utility reimbursing residents for lost food or other inconveniences stemming from a power outage.

"Utilities normally do not provide compensation for lost power," he said. "The only time our insurance company will actually honour a claim and pay it is if there negligence by our field staff."