

Finding our Voice

Perspectives from the CM Board of Directors

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Pruning for Power – A Failed Strategy

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Along with residents, environmental advocates and many certified arborists have expressed outrage regarding Pepco's tree trimming excesses. Pepco's argument has been to claim that Montgomery County's so-called overabundance of trees is causing power outages. But the fact remains: we cannot prune our way to power.

Pepco has manipulated the public with a pervasive campaign for "reliability," boldly and repeatedly linking the fear of power outages to its program of aggressive tree pruning. By doing so, Pepco has effectively distracted a poorly informed and understandably anxious public from the negative impacts of its pruning program. Rather than working to sustain the tree canopy, Pepco suggests that aggressive pruning is required, a necessary "evil," that consumers must choose: power or trees.

But after many days without electricity in 100-degree temperatures, people are beginning to understand that in spite of the damage that storm-felled trees cause, trees are sorely needed. They are not just amenities; they offer life-giving shade. They are the workhorses that lower ambient temperatures and help provide cleaner air and better water quality. We need trees globally to mitigate against climate change and locally to reduce the impact of urban heat islands.

Every tree that Pepco removes or over-cuts deprives customers of cooling shade. When summer temperatures rise, citizens crank up the air conditioning and, accordingly, energy demand increases. As a result, Pepco's earnings increase. To be blunt, removing trees is good for Pepco's business. The downside is that citizens pay. The environment suffers. Atmospheric levels of CO₂ rise. Some citizens are beginning to notice. Some are beginning to grasp that climate change is real.

Pepco, however, denies the seriousness of the problem. Defying recognized sustainability practices, Pepco prunes and prunes again while presenting itself as a "good guy," a company that is community-oriented and working hard to be both reliable and "green." Pepco's TV ads offer free little trees and smart thermostats. These promotions attempt to convince a weary public that Pepco is concerned about their welfare and working hard to improve. This public relations policy amounts to nothing more than green-washing and spin because, in practice, Pepco's on-street pruning program is environmentally devastating and also extremely profitable.

Pepco, the Maryland's Public Service Commission (PSC) and state and local leadership need to get serious about the health of the environment. There needs to be a shake-up at the PSC. The same can be said for local Montgomery County government where too many County bureaucrats are neglecting strategies to maintain and grow a healthy tree canopy. Too many County employees remain indifferent to the benefits trees provide in daily life. Whether along streets or on buildable lots, trees really do matter.

Shortly after the derecho storm of June 2012, Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett called for additional "aggressive tree trimming" by Pepco, stating his belief that Pepco has acted properly and needs to step up its pruning activities in the months ahead. When the impact of aggressive pruning was pointed out, Mr. Leggett later backtracked saying: "I am concerned that such trimming and pruning not be overly aggressive or invasive or destructive to the character of the neighborhoods throughout the county."

Mr. Leggett needs to recognize that there is a profound difference between properly financed regular pruning--part of a tree maintenance program -- and "aggressive, catch-up pruning." The latter approach has resulted in tree butchering, i.e., trees gouged into barren V- and L-shapes, a practice that severely stresses trees, especially during summer months. Ultimately, overly aggressive pruning leads to tree death. It is a practice that ignores the importance of the tree canopy and the role it plays in community health.

And what is the history of the county's own pruning practices? Year after year Mr. Leggett has advocated "cutting" Montgomery County's own pruning and maintenance budget, a decision that has contributed to the decline of roadside trees. Budget constraints have been cited every year as reason for the decision. Now, after recent power outages, Mr. Leggett strongly advocates a return to a regular pruning schedule. Still, the unspoken assumption is that we can more or less prune our way out of power outages. For those of us who have weathered hurricanes or other violent storms, we understand clearly that pruning will have minimal positive benefit during intense weather events. In other words, pruning-for-power is not a solution! The only way to effectively solve problems caused by unusual weather events is for Pepco to underground wires in critical areas, retrain its linemen, and update its transmission equipment.

Montgomery County also needs Council members to step up and lead, to actively demonstrate that they are serious about protecting the environment so that Pepco, cable companies, the building community, and homeowners alike show more respect for our urban forest and ultimately for the neighborhoods in which we all live. Growing trees is not a "hard choice." This is not about complicated compromises. This is about doing the right thing.

A Greek proverb states: "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in." What we need more than ever is leaders who are willing to preserve the trees we have and maintain them so they will stay healthy and potentially less hazardous to residents and property. We also must replant when we lose trees. In other words: preserve, protect, and plant instead of pruning our way out of power outages.

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