

LONG ISLAND / POLITICS

New PSEG storm computer system won't be ready until December



Towers carrying PSEG Long Island transmission lines in Centereach on May 26, 2016. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

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PSEG Long Island's plan to deploy an entirely new storm computer management system has been pushed back to December or even later, top officials said at a LIPA board meeting Friday.

A PSEG official noted there was "some risk" that even a December deadline could be missed.

Separately during the same board meeting, LIPA acting chairman Mark Fischl also issued PSEG an ultimatum to conclude long-delayed negotiations for a new contract.

PSEG Long Island president Dan Eichhorn called next Friday "our drop-dead date" for finalizing a new contract that has been delayed for months, adding there was "a humongous sense of urgency" to meet that deadline.

But his promises drew wary responses from LIPA board members. "If we don't get this done in November, we're going to be looking for other alternatives," said Fischl, suggesting LIPA could rekindle a previous effort to find other third-party contractors or even go fully public.

"This has just been going on for way too long," Fischl said, referring to previous plans to finalize a contract in August.

"You say there's a sense of urgency but we have not seen that," added trustee Alfred Cockfield.

Trustees also expressed wariness over PSEG's shifting schedules to deploy the new storm outage-management computer system.

PSEG Long Island is one of only two utilities in the nation using an obsolete version of the system, for which ratepayers are spending over \$3 million a month to repair and ultimately replace. A newer version of the system, an iteration of which had been in place during the storm, was supposed to be rebuilt and back in place in the spring. But that was pushed back until after storm season this fall, leaving PSEG still using the old system.

In a report to trustees, LIPA noted that PSEG, in relying on an older version of the computer system, still has "not focused on identifying the root causes of the [computer system's] failures," focusing instead on a strategy aimed at reducing the number of customer calls to the system so that it is "never subjected to stress."

During a board committee meeting, trustees raised questions about the costs and delays. PSEG Long Island chief information officer Greg Filipkowski said the current estimated forecast to get the new system up and running, in addition to past remediation costs, was around \$42 million. Some \$33 million has already been spent to date, according to a finance report.

Trustee Sheldon Cohen noted with exasperation the shifting completion timelines for the new system of June, November and now December, and trustee Drew Biondo observed, "It's just a never-ending storm."

Filipkowski explained there were "some performance testing issues we're working through now" to meet the new December deadline. Even to hit the December deadline, said LIPA chief Tom Falcone, "There's still a lot of wood to chop," for PSEG.

Eichhorn later confirmed there was "some risk" to missing the December date, but said, "We are going to implement [the new system] as soon as possible, but no sooner than [after] it passes the rigorous testing we've identified."

In public comments during the meeting, Peter Schlussler, once a member of the Suffolk Legislature's LIPA Oversight Committee, said technology that supports utility functions should get as much attention as the poles and wires that are the backbone of the grid.

"However, the very technology that acts as the most critical function of success with reliability and stability has been universally neglected by PSEG as demonstrated with their custodianship" of the outage management system, he said.

Separately during the board meeting, solar industry executives and activists pressed LIPA trustees to reject a state plan to implement what critics are calling a "solar tax" on new systems starting next year, saying it will stifle already stagnant rooftop solar growth on Long Island.

The so-called customer benefit contribution fee, which could range between \$5 and \$10 a month for new installations, would help pay for low-income and green energy programs for solar customers who sometimes pay little but a \$14 monthly service charge. Falcone defended the fee as modest and likely to have only a minor impact on the time it takes for systems to pay for themselves given energy-cost savings.

But Reid Garton, chief executive of NY State Solar, a solar provider, called for an independent study of the value of home solar systems and said the new fee, if adopted, "will hurt solar and will cause LIPA to miss its goals that it would otherwise hit without the solar tax."

Trustees are scheduled to vote on it in December, after public meetings.