DTE Chairman admits mistakes were made in Ground to Sky tree trimming program

Jay Grossman, *1:49 p.m. EST February 12, 2015*

(Photo: Carroll DeWeese)

DTE Energy Chairman Gerry Anderson acknowledges his company needs to do a better public relations job with its Ground to Sky vegetation management program.

Appearing on the Paul W. Smith morning radio show on Feb. 3, Anderson admitted that DTE contractors should have first met with homeowners and discussed their tree trimming plans – especially along Kensington Road where a number of healthy, mature trees were chopped down.

"The most visible situation was at Sacred Heart Academy, which is a beautiful school in Bloomfield Hills," Anderson said on the show. "A contractor working there removed 11 large, mature trees that lined the school property adjacent to our power lines.

"They believed they did the right thing to improve reliability – but I visited the school personally the next day after the work was done and my immediate comment to our people was, 'This shouldn't have happened.' And I have to tell you I'm really disappointed it did."

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(http://www.hometownlife.com/story/news/local/birmingham/2015/01/21/fieger-files-million-lawsuit-dte-tree-trimming/22113027/)

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(http://www.hometownlife.com/story/news/local/birmingham/2014/12/17/dte-agrees-temporary-hold-tree-trimming-program/20557441/)

While Smith applauded Anderson for owning up to the mistake, local officials are taking concrete measures to make sure it doesn't happen again.

On Monday, the Birmingham City Commission voted unanimously in passing a resolution that calls for DTE to work with Birmingham "on a reasonable tree trimming plan." City Manager Joe Valentine said he wanted the resolution in place before the Ground to Sky program reaches Birmingham.

"We do know they're coming into Birmingham in 2015, so I wanted to set some parameters and put some conditions on the work," he told the commission.

One provision requires DTE to give the city a 30-day notice for when the company plans to work in a certain area in Birmingham. Another provision said the company should err on the side of caution when deciding if it's necessary to trim a tree.

A third provision requires DTE to replace any trees and other vegetation removed from public property. Yet another provision states the company must secure the "appropriate approvals" and authorization for any work done on private property outside of any easements.

"I still question their ability to work on private property legally," Valentine said at the meeting. But he also acknowledged the utility company is not subject to the city's ordinances and regulations.

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(http://www.hometownlife.com/story/opinion/editorials/2014/12/22/public-say-trees-fell/20769549/)

INFORMATION ONLY

BURYING LINES TOO COSTLY?

Following a meeting with DTE officials on Feb. 6, Bloomfield Township Supervisor Leo Savoie said he's confident the company will be more sensitive in how it proceeds with trimming trees near power lines.

"They're going to meet with us in the field to show where they intend to continue," Savoie said at the township board meeting on Monday. "They'll meet with every homeowner and mark every tree they plan to take out – if the homeowner is adamantly opposed to it and they can't reach agreement, DTE will stop work at that property until end of project."

Savoie also said he does not think it's feasible to bury the power lines underground, a suggestion that was made by several of the impacted homeowners.

"The cost of burying the lines is so prohibitive per household it doesn't make any economic sense," he said. "Give or take about 20 percent, just for the city of Bloomfield Hills you're looking at about $375 million. There's roughly 2,300 residential properties in Bloomfield Hills – if you amortize that over 30 years you can do the math and it doesn't make economic sense."

Based on a directive from the Michigan Public Service Commission, DTE began implementing an aggressive tree trimming program in 2014 to help prevent future power outages. An estimated 600,000 customers in southeast Michigan lost power during an ice storm in December 2013, and DTE estimates that approximately 75 percent of the damage to its distribution system was caused by trees.

The Ground to Sky program essentially allows the company to trim or remove any tree that poses a threat to its overhead wires or equipment within a 30-foot easement. This includes trees located on private property.

The work barely started in Bloomfield Township and Bloomfield Hills before public outcry prompted the company to put the program on hold in December. A number of homeowners, particularly along Kensington, accused the company of recklessly clear-cutting the vegetation.

In January, attorney Geoffrey Fieger filed a $54 million lawsuit against the company and its contractors on behalf of several impacted property owners. Fieger, who lives in Bloomfield Hills, publicly accused the company of conducting a "scored-earth campaign."

DTE spokesman Scott Simons agreed the company needs to do a better job in communicating with customers when it resumes the tree trimming program.

"The biggest thing that customers will see is improved communication both with local officials and with the customers themselves," he said Wednesday. "We're going to take officials out in the field and show them what we want to do, why we want to do it and what the benefit will be."

Simons said there's no firm date for when the program will resume.

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To: All Interested Parties
From: Theodore H. Quisenberry, Manager
Subject: Severe Weather Awareness Week
April 12 – April 18, 2015
Date: February 12, 2015

Governor Rick Snyder and Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson have declared the week of April 12 through April 18, 2015 as Severe Weather Awareness Week.

Oakland County Homeland Security Division will be engaged in various public education efforts during Severe Weather Awareness Week. These efforts include instruction on suggested preparations for minimizing the loss of life and destruction of property that can result from severe weather.

During the 2014 severe weather season there were 112 storm-based warnings issued for SE Lower Michigan. There were 3 recorded tornados (our average is six). The warning lead time average was 26 minutes for all severe weather events.

In an effort to promote severe weather safety preparedness, we will conduct a special test of our Outdoor Warning System on:

Wednesday, April 15, 2015 at 1:00 PM

The purpose of this test is to raise the awareness level of our citizens and offer schools and businesses an opportunity to test their internal disaster plans during normal business hours.

A significant part of our program is geared toward educating individuals about severe weather safety and the Oakland County Outdoor Warning System. To assist in this effort, a limited supply of the enclosed sample brochures are available for distribution at *no cost* and can be obtained by filling out the attached order form. A few additional suggestions to assist you with this promotional campaign are noted below:

1) Provide information that will heighten awareness of the Oakland County Outdoor Warning System and what to do when the sirens are activated.
2) Review or develop tornado "take cover" plans (planning materials are available through Oakland County Homeland Security Division).
3) Provide instruction on tornado safety.
4) Publicize the date and time of the test - **Wednesday, April 15 at 1:00 PM**

Thank you for your support of our Severe Weather Awareness Program. Your assistance is vital to our continued success. For more information please visit our web page at **oakgov.com/homelandsecurity**.

INFORMATION ONLY

HOMELAND SECURITY

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Oakland County Homeland Security Division
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test & activation on the
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Wednesday, April 15, 2015 at 1 PM

Providing emergency management planning, response, recovery, and mitigation services for natural, technological, national security and nuclear emergencies or disasters affecting Oakland County, Michigan.

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