



Office of the People's Counsel
ADVOCACY | EDUCATION | PROTECTION



December 2022

A Note from Your People's Counsel Sandra Mattavous-Frye

Let's Expand Solar in a Just and Equitable Way

OPC is a strong advocate of expanding solar power in the District as an option for consumers to consider to lower their electric bills and help meet the city's clean energy goals. However, as the consumer advocate, we could not support the Local Solar Expansion Act that was pushed by the solar industry. The DC Council recently passed the bill with Ward 4 Councilmember Janeese Lewis George casting the lone no vote. The final legislation does include an amendment OPC requested that directs us to submit to the Council a study of the city's solar policies every three years, as well as make recommendations to ensure ratepayers are not unduly impacted by those policies. Why did OPC oppose the bill? Because it's expected to significantly increase the electric bills of lower income residents.



First, it's helpful to understand the city's current clean energy requirements. A 2018 law requires electric suppliers such as Pepco to provide a portion of their electricity supply from solar energy generated in the District. If the electric suppliers do not meet this requirement, they must pay an "Alternative Compliance Payment." The ACP is then used to fund Solar for All, the District's program designed to bring the benefits of solar power to lower income residents. But this payment could also be passed on to electric customers.

The solar industry claimed that it is a victim of its own success, as solar is becoming more popular—so popular that expanded solar could decrease the ACP funds generated and trigger a market crash. To avoid a crash, solar installers claimed the Council must raise the ACP and the local solar requirement. However, when OPC's economist and other experts analyzed the legislation, they determined it would increase utility bills an average of \$4 to \$8 a month and may not expand solar significantly. OPC also found there was not sufficient evidence that a crash would occur. With such high costs, and so little documented benefit for consumers, OPC opposed the bill, arguing that a study should be done first to find out what is needed to keep the local solar industry strong and what's the best way to accomplish this with the least harm to consumers, especially low-income and senior residents.

The Council's own [Office of Racial Equity](#) found that the bill "will harm economic outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx residents." While still opposing the bill, OPC, environmental organizations, organized labor, and other advocates had worked to amend the bill to minimize consumer harm.

District residents are already struggling with high inflation, the continued effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising electric and gas prices. OPC strongly believes it's important for solar to thrive in the District. It plays a critical role as we all work together to help the city reach its ambitious clean energy goals but achieving that result cannot be the sole burden of ratepayers. OPC will not deter from its mission to ensure that all DC residents receive the equal benefits from a clean and healthy environment at just and equitable rates.

***From the OPC family to yours, wishing all a
Happy, Healthy, and Safe New Year!***



Why is Verizon Calling?



Verizon recently informed some consumers in the District that the company will no longer provide landline telephone service over copper lines, and to maintain service with Verizon, customers must switch to a fiber-based landline.

OPC has been actively involved in the copper-to-fiber transition proceedings on the local and national level. As DC residents have raised concerns with OPC, we've had recent conversations with Verizon about the company's intentions. Here's what you need to know.

Why is this happening?

At one time, copper wires provided the backbone of voice and internet communications in the United States. Over the last few years, however, the largest telecom providers are increasingly replacing Plain Old Telephone Service (POTS) over copper wire infrastructure with internet-based fiber optic cables. According to the providers, there is decreasing use of traditional landline service and the newer fiber optic infrastructure is more reliable, cheaper to maintain, and able to transmit more information than POTS wiring.

What does this mean for consumers?

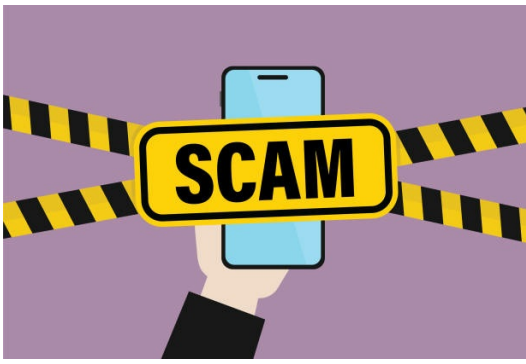
According to Verizon, residential customer voice services will be transferred from copper to fiber over several years. The transfer to fiber will be at no additional cost to consumers. The telephone service will retain the same price, protections, terms, and conditions, the company says. Customers who subscribe to Verizon's High Speed Internet Service over copper will need to choose a fiber-based product or obtain internet service from another provider.

Why are consumers concerned?

Many consumers believe copper wire service is more reliable because the copper lines carry enough electricity to enable older landline phones with cords to continue to operate during a power outage without the need for a battery backup. On the other hand, fiber-based infrastructure does not carry an electrical current. As such, telephone systems on a fiber network must always be connected to the home's electricity or a battery backup unit (BBU). Senior consumers have expressed concerns about giving up their current lines.

On its "Fiber is Coming" [webpage](#), Verizon states: "We will provide you with a backup battery device at no charge that will power your voice service in the event of a power outage, allowing you to make and receive calls, including to 911, on your corded telephones." These BBU's contain D-cell batteries that consumers may replace on their own, if needed.

As the advocate for landline phone consumers, we urge consumers to contact OPC at (202) 727-3071, should you experience problems with your service or have questions about the transition.



Don't Let the Utility Grinch Scam Your Home for the Holidays

It happens all year round, but scam artists seem to step up their “grinch game” during the holiday season. OPC

has received recent reports of utility scammers contacting consumers via telephone and text messages warning that their “Pepco service will be disconnected within the hour,” if an electronic bill payment is not made right away. It’s particularly alarming that the perpetrators appear to be communicating via the actual Pepco telephone number to seem legitimate. OPC immediately alerted Pepco of this scam when it was brought to our attention.

Consumers should know that Pepco will never call you to take a payment over the telephone. Pepco will never ask that you go to a store to get a cash payment card to pay your bill. Pepco will not call you and ask for personal information such as your account number, social security number or address.

Pepco *will* send notices to you by postal mail if your bill is delinquent.

If you are suspicious or have questions about a call or text about your electric bill, call Pepco directly at the numbers found on your bill or contact OPC at (202) 727-3071.

Ringling in the New Year with a New Role

Congratulations to Stephen Dudek, OPC’s new Associate Director. Prior to moving into this position this month, Stephen served as the Manager of our Water Services Division since December 2020. He has been a DC government employee for more than six years.



“I am honored to have the opportunity to take on this new role as the Associate Director, guiding the work of the Consumer Services and Water Services Divisions. We already do great work, so I look forward to working with my colleagues to continue to fulfill OPC’s mission and the challenge of raising the divisions and agency to new heights,” Stephen says.

OPC’s staff is looking forward to achieving new goals with Stephen and we are confident of his success.



Intern Spotlight: Jourdan Johnson is Striking a Chord with Consumers

OPC is pleased to provide internship opportunities to local college students each year to give them a look inside the utility consumer world. This month, we feature Jourdan Johnson, a junior at Howard University. She is assisting

OPC's Technical Services Division by conducting a survey that will generate data on District residents' opinions and experiences as utility consumers.

She says: "The survey is relevant as it will help OPC better understand community experiences with the local utility companies. Hopefully, we will be able to see trends across DC neighborhoods that will give the Office a clearer understanding as to where it needs to focus consumer outreach efforts." Jourdan is initiating the survey through phone and mail interviews so that OPC can get direct feedback from consumers as to what concerns they have as utility ratepayers.

The Fort Worth, Texas native is studying communications and business administration. Jourdan says that while she is interested in business, entertainment, and civic engagement, at this time, she is undecided about her career path and is pondering whether to attend graduate school.

Jourdan is active with campus organizations, including the Bison Buddies and the Student Council. She enjoys playing basketball, watching movies and baking desserts, and is a classically trained pianist with over a decade of experience. We're appreciative that Jourdan has been able to strike a chord with OPC staff and District consumers.

OPC Connecting at the PSC



**PUBLIC SERVICE
COMMISSION**

**OPC is Advocating for Consumers in the
Following Cases:**

**Formal Case No. 1174: The Washington Gas Light Company's
Application for Authority to Issue Debt Securities**

On December 5, 2022, OPC filed reply comments to the Apartment and Office Building Association's comments about WGL's application to issue debt securities. To do business, utilities raise funds by issuing stocks and by issuing debt securities or borrowing money at a fixed interest rate. Utilities are allowed to recover all costs from ratepayers, so the higher the interest rates, the higher the utility rates consumers must pay.

OPC In Your Neighborhood!

OPC looks forward to seeing you in-person. We welcome the opportunity to speak at your Advisory Neighborhood Commission, civic association or community group meeting onsite or virtually. We can give updates on utility issues, trends, and outline how we serve. Call (202) 727-3071 if your group would like our staff to make a presentation onsite or "Zoom in." Contact the organizations listed below if you would like links to attend the meetings we'll be visiting virtually.

Senior Christmas Party
Thursday, December 29, 2022
11:00 am - 1:00 pm
Benning Stoddert Recreation Center
100 Stoddert Place SE

Ward 7 & 8 Coalition Meeting
Friday, January 6, 2023
10:00 am - 12:00 pm
Virtual

Rejoining Neighbors at Paul Laurence Dunbar Apartments
Wednesday, January 11, 2023
11:00 am - 2:30 pm
2001 15th Street NW

United Planning Organization Martin Luther King, Jr.
Memorial Breakfast
Friday, January 13, 2023
8:30 am
Ronald Reagan Building
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW

Photo Gallery



Members of the OPC UCAN/Utility Consumer Advisory Network get the final 2022 quarterly utility issues update from OPC staff. People’s Counsel Sandra Mattavous-Frye thanks the lay consumer advocates for keeping OPC abreast of community issues.



OPC's Denise Blackson, who is also an Advisory Neighborhood and Housing Commissioner, is with Mayor Muriel Bowser at the ribbon cutting of a new housing development in Ward 6.



Celebrating the holiday season with members of DC women's groups on the back row are OPC's Jean Gross-Bethel (3rd from left), Linda Jefferson (wearing hat) Valca Valentine (adjacent right), and Doxie McCoy (3rd from right)

Connect With OPC!

Do you have feedback or an idea for an article that could be featured in an upcoming edition of the OPC Connection? We want to hear from you! Just drop our editorial team an email @ info@opc-dc.gov or tweet us [@DCOPC](https://twitter.com/DCOPC).

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