OPC-DC
Office of the People's Counsel
ADVOCACY | EDUCATION | PROTECTION

Currents of Change

OPC's Journey to Protect Utility Consumers

1975 - 2023

The History of the Office of the People's Counsel


FRAUDULENT CLAIMS
NO
POWER PLANT
MAYOR KELLY
NO
POWER PLANT
MAYOR KELLY
IS IT THE DEVELOPER OR THE NEIGHBORHOOD?
D.C. wants HOME RULE NOW!
Home Rule NOW
OPC THROUGH THE YEARS

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URBAN LEAGUE
D.C. HOME RULE
Pepco Loses Round 1 on Rate Boost
New people's counsel
OPC-DC


Office of
ADVOCACY
OPC

Foreword

In the heart of Washington, D.C., where monumental decisions shape the course of our nation, there is an often overlooked yet vital thread that weaves through the fabric of our lives: utility services. These services, which provide electricity, gas, water, and telecommunications to our homes and businesses, are not amenities; they provide, collectively, the means of our existence.

Utility services are a basic human right, not a luxury. They reach into every home and business, touching every life, regardless of background or circumstance. They illuminate our homes, power our devices, quench our thirst, and connect us with the world. If there is a problem with your utilities, your quality of life is seriously diminished.

This storybook is a chronicle of the events and circumstances that led to the rebirth of the Office of the People's Counsel (OPC) and its work in the utility space.

OPC was created to protect, advocate for, educate, and empower all ratepayers in the District of Columbia, especially those residents who are often overlooked and lack the resources and voice to make their needs known. Though consumers had an advocate in the past within the Public Service Commission from 1926 to 1952, the unfortunate dissolution of the People's Counsel office in 1952 left them without one until 1975 when Congress resurrected OPC as an independent agency.[1]

In the crucible of change and challenge throughout the eras, OPC's mission has remained steadfast: to ensure that every D.C. resident receives utility services that are not only reliable, affordable, and equitable but also environmentally sustainable.

This storybook celebrates OPC's impact to date, which includes significant rate reductions, strong consumer protections, service reliability assurances, sustainability, and clean air initiatives. Since its inception in 1975, OPC has delivered $1.2 billion (about $4 per person in the United States) in overall savings to ratepayers, secured utility rates that are among the lowest on the Eastern Seaboard, and shaped vital legislation that will impact generations to come.[2]

We are living in an era increasingly defined by climate change and energy crises, so OPC's focus must continue to evolve to address the most pressing issues. The future of utilities demands our undivided attention. The risk of failing to preserve the work and vision of OPC is too great. As we take important steps to protect the utility rights of future generations, we must not forget the lessons of the past.

This storybook is a testament to our past, a guide for our present, and a beacon for our future. Our commitment to consumer empowerment, affordability, reliability, energy efficiency, and environmental sustainability is unwavering.

With deep conviction,

Sandra Mattavous Frye

Sandra Mattavous-Frye, Esq.
People's Counsel,
Office of the People's Counsel

Home Rule demonstration at the District Building, October 1973[3]

An Era Without a Consumer Advocate

01

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the United States underwent a profound transformation. A surge of activism and change swept the nation. Participants in the Civil Rights Movement fought tirelessly for equality and justice while Vietnam War protesters challenged government policies. Calls for individual rights and social justice reverberated from coast to coast. As the heart of the nation, Washington, D.C. mirrored this wave of change. The city's unique circumstances made it a microcosm of the broader national protest movements.

However, D.C. was a glaring paradox. The city was the center of democratic power, yet Congress controlled its government, schools, and other aspects of residents' daily lives. By 1970, D.C. was 71% African American,[4] in large part due to white flight sparked by the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. Despite being the capital of the free world and, in the words of historian Barbara Lightman, "the Black capital of America,"[5] Congress still retained control, leaving the predominantly Black city politically powerless.

This lack of representation extended to utilities, which were then – and remain to this day – giant monopolies. Segregation, limited job opportunities, and inadequate housing persisted alongside daily challenges with utility service within African American communities. Over 12% of Black homes lacked running water, and over 16% had no electricity.[6]

1970 After Martin Luther King Jr.'s assasination, the riots and "white flight" that followed, D.C. was 71% African American.

1973 Home Rule is signed by President Richard Nixon, granting limited self-governance to D.C. Walter E. Washington becomes the first elected mayor.

1973/74 Arab Oil embargo causes turmoil. Energy crisis disrupts the nation. The Public Service Commission is faced with manifold of utility complaints.

The demand for rights, the push for home rule, and mounting grievances concerning utility services created heavy pressure that moved the city toward change.

During this period, the giant gas, electricity, and telecommunications utilities were loosely regulated, which allowed them to set rates and policies without public accountability. Rates skyrocketed, services were doled out inequitably, system reliability plummeted, and unplanned outages increased. The residents had no recourse.

> **"Consumers were upset, but the people had nowhere to go. You either pay the utilities, or you don't have utility service. They had no voice."**
>
> - Karen Sistrunk, Deputy People's Counsel, Office of the People's Counsel

The Vanishing Advocate

Established by Congress in 1913, the Public Service Commission (PSC) of the District of Columbia was charged with regulating utility rates in the District. New legislation in 1926 reorganized the Commission and dedicated a lawyer to act as a People's Counsel in all Commission hearings and judicial proceedings involving the interests of the customers.

Budget constraints led to the dissolution of the People's Counsel position at the PSC in 1952, leaving D.C. residents without dedicated consumer representation, a situation that would last for decades. As time passed, mounting consumer complaints were increasingly aimed at the PSC. Barbara Morgan, a long-time Washingtonian and lifelong lay consumer advocate, recollected, **"They didn't pay too much attention to what we as citizens had to say. Back in the day, we weren't actually heard, or they didn't take our concerns the way that they do now."** Yet, the people continued to sound the alarm. Citizen groups from various sectors began to participate in PSC proceedings.

On December 23, 1973, President Richard Nixon signed the District of Columbia Self-Government and Governmental Reorganization Act, better known as the Home Rule Act, which granted limited self-governance to the District.[7] Advisory Neighborhood Commissions were created, the Council of the District of Columbia (D.C. Council) was formed, and Walter E. Washington became the first elected mayor. The Home Rule Act also granted the Council power to pass laws that would go on to affect education, public safety, and transportation.

In addition to the passage of this new law, pressure was mounting in the realm of utilities: The energy crisis, triggered by the Arab oil embargo, had pushed crude oil prices up by 70%[8] and the utility consumer complaints were still increasing at the PSC. The stage was set for the reinstatement of a consumer advocate. The new Office of the People's Counsel would become a beacon for consumer protection in that high-pressure era of change and challenge in the nation's capital.

Left to right, Bishop Paul Moore, Jr, Dorothy Simms Fauntroy, Rev. Walter Fauntroy, and Martin Luther King at the March for Home Rule, 1965[9]

Building a Foundation of Consumer Rights

02

On September 26, 1974, William Stratton, the former chairman of the Public Service Commission (PSC), appeared before the House District Committee with a sincere plea that echoed the mounting apprehensions of the city's residents: "Consumer concern with rising utility bills has prompted this hearing," he declared. He reminded Congress of its responsibility to regulate utilities while holding the public interest in trust. Stratton spoke because he recognized that the environment was shifting and that the utilities and customers who used them were facing dramatic changes.

His words before the House District Committee were heavy with the weight of a profound truth:

"Most Americans must depend on a power company to provide them with electricity and a gas or oil company to provide them with home heating fuel. The consumer has virtually no opportunity to shop around for this basic commodity."[10]

Congress took decisive action in response to the call of the people. They understood the urgency and signed into law 88 Stat. 1975, Public Law 93-614, resurrecting the Office of the People's Counsel (OPC). This move marked a turning point in the fight for fair utility rates. On January 2, 1975, OPC became an independent agency within the District of Columbia government.

1975 OPC is re-established as an independent agency within the D.C. government. Annice Wagner is appointed the first People's Counsel.

1977 Brian Lederer is appointed the second People's Counsel. Consumer Utility Board is established with a grant from the Department of Energy.

1987 OPC gains budget autonomy from the PSC, enabling its ability to retain qualified experts to fight for ratepayers.

But the rebirth of OPC was not just the creation of an administrative entity; it was the birth of a movement – a movement to ensure that the District's utility consumers have a voice and are protected and represented, especially in the face of impending rate hikes and an evolving energy landscape.

How OPC Functions

OPC's Mission Statement

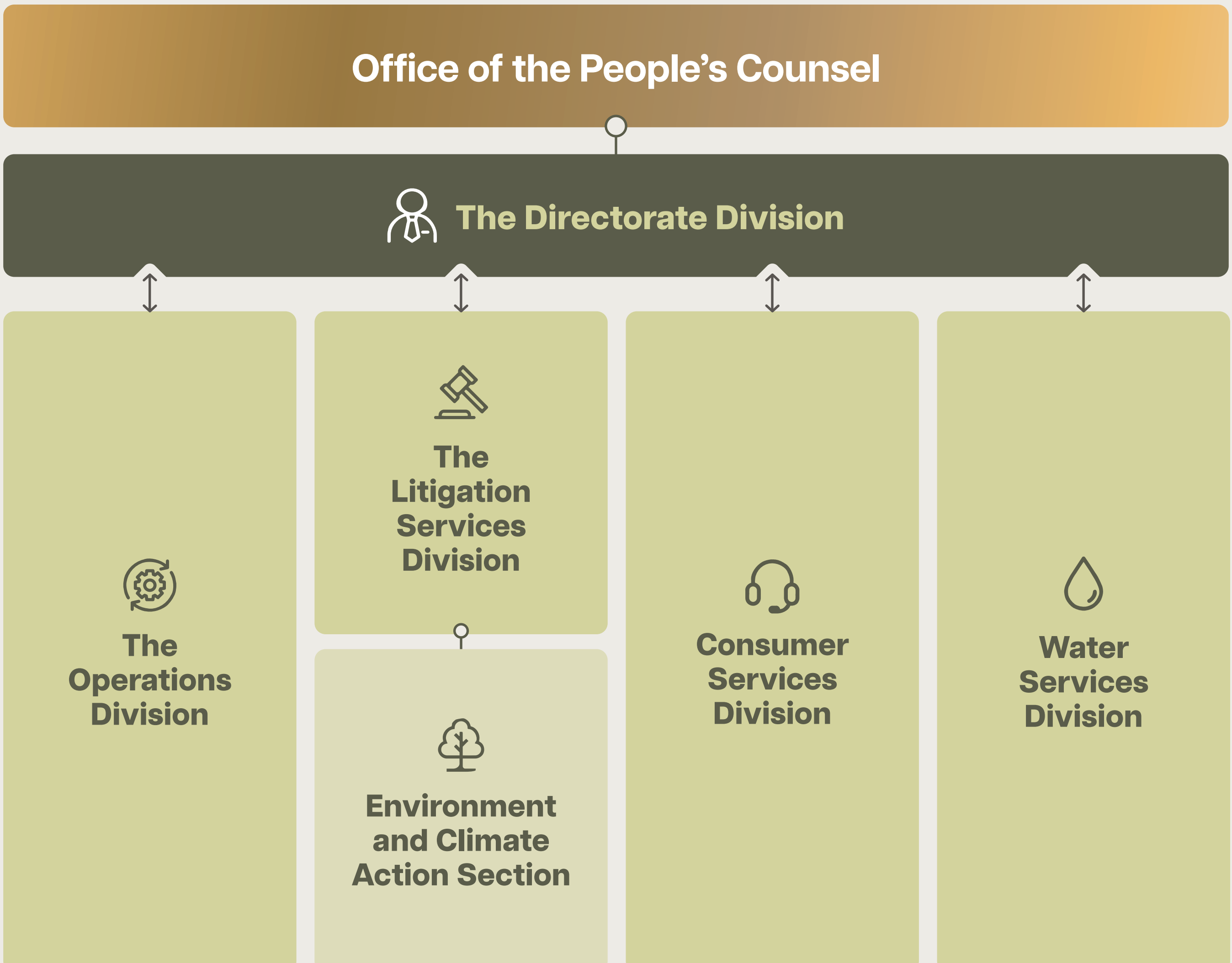
The Office of the People's Counsel (OPC) is an independent agency of the District of Columbia government. By law, it advocates for consumers of natural gas, electric, telephone, and water services in the District. OPC's mission is to advocate, educate, and protect D.C. utility consumers.

The Office's mandate includes advocating for the provision of quality utility service and equitable treatment at rates that are just, reasonable, and nondiscriminatory; advocating for climate change policies that transition the District to a clean energy economy and a sustainable environment in support of the District's climate goals and that benefit utility consumers.

To further its mission, OPC assists individual consumers in billing and service disputes with utility companies and provides technical assistance, education, and outreach to consumers, community groups, and associations. It also conducts independent investigations and testifies at D.C. Council hearings on many utility-related issues.

OPC's Organizational Structure

OPC's organizational structure is configured to ensure the agency succeeds in achieving its goal of representing D.C. consumers zealously. The agency is headed by the People's Counsel, an attorney appointed by the Mayor of the District of Columbia. OPC has five divisions, with each unit responsible for distinct aspects of consumer advocacy.



OPC's Funding Mechanism

One of OPC's defining characteristics is its funding independence.[11] To fully participate in complex litigation before the PSC and the courts, the People's Counsel is authorized to retain the professional services of attorneys and expert technical consultants, such as economists, accountants, and engineers, as needed to represent D.C. utility consumers effectively. By law, the affected utility company is required to pay the costs of regulatory litigation of the Office through a special franchise tax. This applies to the PSC as well. In turn, the law recognizes the utility may include these costs, as well as its own litigation-related expenses, as operating expenses and charge them to ratepayers. OPC applies a special franchise fee tax assessed directly against utility companies to fund litigation efforts related to specific cases the utilities bring before the PSC.

OPC's Role in the Utility Arena

OPC's role is distinctive: It is the sole entity dedicated to representing consumer interests. In a regulatory environment that includes the Council of the District of Columbia (D.C. Council), the PSC, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and the Environmental Protection Administration (EPA), OPC's involvement gives consumers a platform from which to speak.

The Public Service Commission

The PSC is the decision-maker in the regulatory process. It sets utility rates and establishes policies that affect service quality. The Commission acts as a quasi-judicial body and is obligated to balance the interests of utility shareholders and ratepayers. By law, the PSC must base its decisions on the evidentiary record created by the parties in the cases.

The D.C. Council

The D.C. Council is the city's legislative body and comprises 13 elected members. It plays a pivotal role in overseeing various government agencies, including OPC. The body enacts legislation affecting utility consumers. OPC participates in Council hearings, presents its annual budget proposal for consideration, and advises on proposed utility-related D.C. legislation.

Federal Agencies

FERC, the FCC, and the EPA are federal regulatory agencies that oversee both interstate and international communications, natural gas, oil, electricity transmission, and environmental impacts. OPC represents the interests of District utility ratepayers before these agencies, the courts, and the U.S. Congress.

FIRST PEOPLE'S COUNSEL

Annice M. Wagner (1975-1977)

Annice M. Wagner was a consummate trailblazer and the first appointed People's Counsel when OPC was re-established in 1975. A native Washingtonian, Wagner graduated from Dunbar High School in 1955 and earned her undergraduate and law degrees at Wayne State University in 1959 and 1962, respectively. Her tenure as People's Counsel set the tone of advocacy, education, and protection that would define the OPC mission, approach, and operations into the next century. Wagner defined the importance of consumer protection and etched OPC's legacy of ratepayer protection and support. The Consumer Bill of Rights was Wagner's brainchild. She filed a petition seeking an investigation asking for the approval of consumer protection rules in 1975. These regulations were adopted by the PSC in 1979 and have since become the cornerstone of consumer protections for utility consumers in the District.

Following her tenure at OPC, Wagner had a storied judicial career. She became a judge of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia in June 1977, and in 1990, she was elevated to the Court of Appeals. She was designated chief judge in 1994, becoming the country's first African American woman chief justice at the state level. The District of Columbia Bar Association established the Annice M. Wagner Pioneer Award in her honor to recognize her extraordinary community and public service contributions.

OPC's First Opportunity to Advocate

OPC had its first opportunity to flex its advocacy muscles in 1975, during Judge Wagner's tenure. Against the backdrop of stagflation caused by the combination of high consumer price inflation, stagnant economic growth, and rising unemployment – made worse by an energy crisis – OPC represented residential ratepayers in their first-ever electricity rate case against the Potomac Electric Power Company (Pepco). The utility had sought a substantial $50.83 million rate increase, citing declining energy sales and conservation efforts as the reason for reduced earnings.[12] OPC opposed the rate hike, arguing that the increase was unnecessary and served only to boost Pepco's revenue at ratepayers' expense.

On November 12, 1975, the PSC denied a substantial part of Pepco's rate increase request. This groundbreaking case marked a victory for OPC because it secured fair electricity rates for D.C. residents and set a standard for later cases.

SECOND PEOPLE'S COUNSEL

Brian Lederer (1977-1984)

Brian Lederer was appointed the second People's Counsel in 1977 and served until 1984. He began his tenure with a pledge to help stabilize utility rates and generate more community input by engaging Advisory Neighborhood Commissions and establishing a new community-based consumer outreach office. A native of Honolulu, Lederer practiced law in Hawaii, Arkansas, and the District of Columbia prior to becoming People's Counsel and was a founding member of the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates, which is a membership organization of representatives from 44 states and Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Barbados. Overseeing OPC in the 1970s during the energy crisis, Lederer secured a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). The DOE's Office of Consumer Protection section gave funds to six newly created state utility consumer advocate offices, including D.C. The grants were to institutionalize grassroots participation in the citywide energy debate, forging a path of consumer engagement that has remained a hallmark of the agency to this day. Access to funding for building operations was critical in those early days as OPC fought to level the playing field on behalf of ratepayers against the powerful phone, electric, and gas companies. The grant facilitated the creation of a Consumer Utility Board (CUB).

Lederer also provided OPC a decisive advocacy role in challenging utility rate cases and facilitating the public's ability to testify at community hearings.

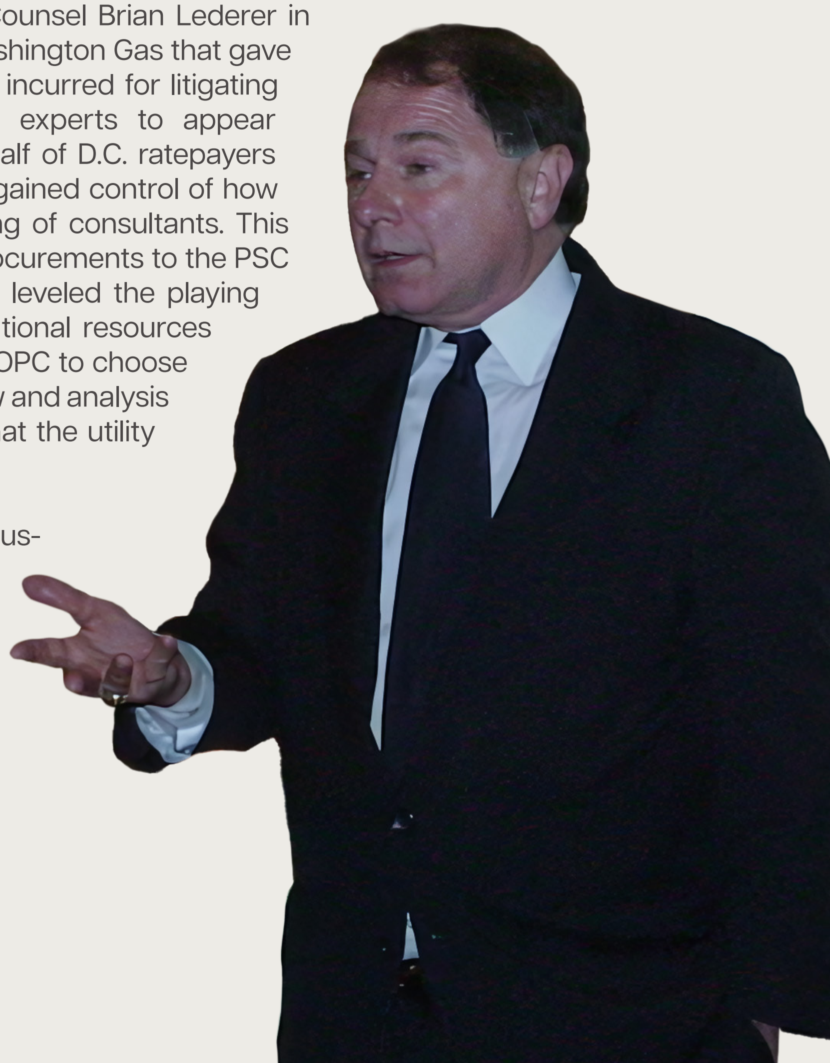
Under his leadership, the agency succeeded in lowering off-peak electricity rates and preventing Pepco from charging customers for power plant construction costs before the plants went online to serve customers. This guaranteed that projects were providing "used and useful" service before the utilities could recover the costs. These policies are all still in place.

Consumer Rights: Central From the Start

In 1977, a grant from the federal DOE helped establish the CUB, which was composed of lay advocates who volunteered to serve on the Board. They worked to defend the interests of D.C. consumers of gas, electricity, and telephone services. A non-exhaustive list of "founders" includes Col. George Haley, Joyce Robinson Paul, Dr. Robert Stiehler, Dr. Jerome Paige, Peter Espenscheid, Juanita Thorton, Lewis Thurston, and Charles Weaver, who were long-term community activists from all areas of the city. The group was racially, generationally, and politically diverse and committed to enhancing the lives of underrepresented D.C. consumers. OPC staff members Richard Powell and Lenore Pomerance helped coordinate CUB's meetings. In 1979, CUB published "Report to the People," an early primer on the savings achieved through conservation. Herbert Harris Jr., a 20-year member of CUB and Chair from 1999 to 2014, said, **"The relationship with OPC was one of interdependency and transparency. We looked to OPC for legal and technical support, which they freely provided."** CUB's establishment was a significant step toward advancing consumer interests. It was reorganized in 2016 as a nonprofit organization.

In 1981, the Consumer Services Division (CSD) was formally established at OPC. Over the years, CSD has adapted to the evolving utility markets. For example, as the number of complaints exploded and grew more complex, CSD expanded its outreach events, increased stakeholder alliances, and used social media to connect directly with consumers. CSD remains the heart of OPC's connection to the community and is pivotal in ensuring consumers are well-informed. Its core services include consumer counseling, complaint resolution, and public education campaigns, using resources like brochures, fact sheets, and guides to simplify complex utility regulations into easy-to-understand materials for diverse audiences. OPC's outreach materials are translated into seven languages to ensure service to all D.C. residents.

In an effort to use its resources more effectively to represent the interests of consumers, under the leadership of People's Counsel Brian Lederer in 1982, OPC won a groundbreaking case against Washington Gas that gave OPC assessment authority to recover expenses it incurred for litigating cases, hiring attorneys, and retaining technical experts to appear before the PSC as witnesses and lawyers on behalf of D.C. ratepayers in utility proceedings. Following that, in 1987, OPC gained control of how it procured goods and services, such as the hiring of consultants. This meant that OPC no longer needed to submit its procurements to the PSC or utility companies for review. This development leveled the playing field because it provided OPC with greater institutional resources to fight for consumers. Budget autonomy allowed OPC to choose which qualified experts it wanted to retain for review and analysis of the complex economic and engineering data that the utility companies submitted to the PSC.



More recently, People's Counsel Sandra Mattavous-Frye formed the Utility Consumer Advisory Network (UCAN) in 2018. UCAN is composed of diverse consumer advocates who support OPC as it seeks to carry out its objective, act as a sounding board for OPC on issues affecting consumers, advocate policy positions in the community, and inform the Office of key utility issues impacting D.C. residents.

A New Open Market for Utilities

03

D.C. residents in the 1970s were the beneficiaries of thriving businesses and a renewed urban landscape – a promising development for the city. Yet they were also subject to escalating electricity costs and the effects of gentrification. While some would describe D.C.'s growth as a renaissance, the underbelly of this progress wrought ugly effects: Vulnerable communities were displaced and marginalized, and violent crime rates surged. A shadow lingered over the city's progress.

Electricity costs had reached alarming levels by July 1979 – from $35.87 to $45.72 in just a year.[13] Several factors contributed to this increase: unprecedented heat index drove higher energy consumption, which in turn led electric utility companies to introduce summer surcharges during peak demand periods. On top of this, fuel costs rose too, which had an effect on both gas and electricity services. It is no surprise that the brunt of these cost increases affected those who were under-resourced and discriminated against.

1984 Fredrick D. Dorsey is appointed the third People's Counsel in 1984. Bell Atlantic Company is formed after AT&T divests from local operating companies.

1987 The utility market is deregulated. Multiple suppliers enter into the local D.C. utilities market, intensifying competition. Consumers faced a risk of high rates and poor service.

1991 Elizabeth A. Noel is appointed the fourth People's Counsel in 1991 and serves in that capacity for 18 years.

1979 D.C. adopts Utility Consumer Bill of Rights to safeguard consumer rights amid changes. It is revised in 2009 to account for technological advances.

2016 Pepco/Exelon merge, creating the largest electric utility conglomerate in the nation.

> **“It seemed as if those of us who lived in Wards 7 and 8 were the ones that were forgotten because it was more African Americans. Sometimes you didn’t have electricity, or your lights would go off. I remember one year; everything went out and a lot of us lost all of our food because of not having proper insulation.”**
>
> \- Barbara Morgan, lifelong lay consumer advocate

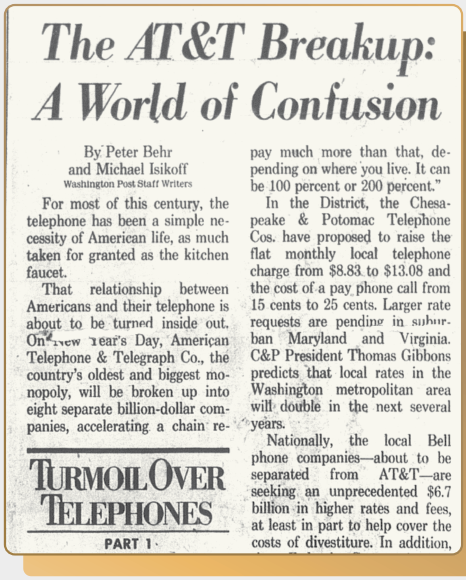
Winds of Change – Bell Atlantic Telephone Divestiture and Energy Utility Deregulation

Transformation in the telecommunications industry began in the 1970s when the U.S. Justice Department filed an antitrust lawsuit against AT&T.[14] Almost a decade later, the lawsuit was settled, requiring AT&T to dismantle its century-long monopoly, which opened doors to competition and innovation.[15] In January 1984, AT&T, the parent company, divested its local operating companies (the Bell system), thus forming the Regional Bell Operating Companies or “Baby Bells,” such as the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company (C&P), which became the Bell Atlantic Company.[16] AT&T retained its long-distance telephone and equipment business, and C&P took charge of D.C.’s local telephone service operations. To implement the settlement, the Public Service Commission (PSC) opened an investigation to dissect the division of assets between AT&T and C&P, all while C&P was in the process of merging with Bell Atlantic Company. The Office of the People’s Counsel (OPC) was an active party to the proceedings.

At the same time, Bell Atlantic sought a rate increase that exceeded $11 million.[17] OPC vigorously opposed the proposed rate increase, urging the PSC to consider the impact of such a rate increase on consumers. In the end, PSC determined that the divestiture case was not about adjusting rates but about ensuring that the settlement agreement of the Bell Company asset breakup was carried out properly. OPC proved its commitment to safeguarding consumer interests even amid significant industry changes.

Across the nation, utility companies argued for further deregulation, claiming it would protect consumers against skyrocketing utility costs by introducing increased market competition and efficiencies. Nationally, the impetus for change gained momentum by 1989, marking the inception of a transformative era that would reshape the utility industry.

All this, however, was just a foreshadow of what was to come to the city with the recession in the early 1990s. Massive federal job cuts worsened the economic woes of those who were already struggling.



The AT&T Breakup: A World of Confusion

By Peter Behr
and Michael Isikoff
Washington Post Staff Writers

For most of this century, the telephone has been a simple necessity of American life, as much taken for granted as the kitchen faucet.

That relationship between Americans and their telephone is about to be turned inside out. On New Year's Day, American Telephone & Telegraph Co., the country's oldest and biggest monopoly, will be broken up into eight separate billion-dollar companies, accelerating a chain re-

TURMOIL OVER TELEPHONES

PART 1

pay much more than that, depending on where you live. It can be 100 percent or 200 percent.”

In the District, the Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Cos. have proposed to raise the flat monthly local telephone charge from $8.83 to $13.08 and the cost of a pay phone call from 15 cents to 25 cents. Larger rate requests are pending in suburban Maryland and Virginia. C&P President Thomas Gibbons predicts that local rates in the Washington metropolitan area will double in the next several years.

Nationally, the local Bell phone companies—about to be separated from AT&T—are seeking an unprecedented $6.7 billion in higher rates and fees, at least in part to help cover the costs of divestiture. In addition,

THIRD PEOPLE'S COUNSEL

Frederick D. Dorsey (1984-1990)

Frederick D. Dorsey distinguished himself as a consumer advocate in an era when the advocacy movement was gaining strength. In 1982, he joined the D.C. government as the principal deputy corporation counsel for two years before his appointment to the Office of the People's Counsel. Dorsey became the third People's Counsel for the District of Columbia in 1984 and served in that position until 1990.

On Dorsey's watch, OPC's budget and staff levels rose, and by the end of his tenure, the operational capacity of the agency had been upgraded. He created systems that grew the Office and enhanced its capacity to effectively advocate for D.C. ratepayers in accordance with its statutory mandate. In this role, Dorsey planned and implemented a multiyear agency expansion and realignment in accord with newly enacted legislation that clarified the agency's statutory authority.

In 1987, the District of Columbia Bar named Dorsey Consumer Lawyer of the Year. He served on the executive board of the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates and became vice president of the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates in 1989. After Dorsey's OPC tenure, he became an associate judge on the Superior Court of the District of Columbia from 1990 until his retirement in 2003.

Deregulation Plays Out in the D.C. Market

Historically, utility companies controlled the energy markets without competition – vertically integrated monopolies that were solely responsible for generating, transmitting, and distributing electricity to customers.

"25 years ago, Pepco was a vertically integrated monopoly. Pepco owned generation stations in the city and outside of the city and ran the entirety of the distribution transmission and distribution system from those generating stations into the District of Columbia."

- Ted Trabue, Commissioner, D.C. Public Service Commission

The PSC had regulated utilities based on each company's total cost of service to determine whether the resulting rates were "just and reasonable." But, everything changed following the Bell Atlantic divestiture.

States across the country began restructuring efforts to introduce competition into their own markets, and by the mid-90s, the push for regulatory reform and competition had intensified. The changes taking place nationally affected the utility environment in local settings – and D.C. was no exception. OPC opposed the introduction of competition into the utility market because it believed prices would increase as a result, but despite OPC's opposition, the PSC allowed competitive suppliers entry to the local D.C. utilities market.

Trifecta Rate Case Against Major Utilities

Alongside huge changes and uncertainty in the utilities market, the federal Tax Reform Act of 1986 moved the needle in the right direction for D.C. ratepayers. As a result of the Act's passage, utility consumers saw savings to the tune of $42 million[18] – and it was Dorsey's work with the OPC that D.C. ratepayers were the first in the country to benefit from the tax cuts.

Though the tax reform act reduced corporate tax rates, utility companies that benefited from this tax cut had no intention of passing any savings on to utility customers. The utility companies continued to charge customers the same as they did before, so in 1986, before the tax cuts took effect, OPC took the lead and sought a reduction in consumer rates across three of the major utilities: Pepco, C&P Telephone, and Washington Gas. OPC initiated discussions with the utility companies in hopes of avoiding more complicated proceedings.

These discussions resulted in settlement proposals in which the utility companies voluntarily agreed to reduce their rates – thus avoiding time-consuming hearings.

Settlement agreements resulted in approximately

$20 million

for D.C. ratepayers,[19] underscoring OPC's value as a consumer advocate.

FOURTH PEOPLE'S COUNSEL

Elizabeth A. Noel (1991-2010)

Elizabeth "Betty" A. Noel served as the fourth People's Counsel from 1991 to 2010, the longest tenure in the role. She previously served as deputy people's counsel for several years. During Noel's leadership, she solidified OPC's reputation as an unwavering defender of D.C. consumer rights and interests. Noel championed the representation of residents with unfaltering dedication, famously stating, "The ratepayers are OPC's shareholders."

Under her guidance, OPC expanded technical assistance to community and civic groups and increased its in-house staff to 36 members. Noel was a consummate policy strategist, litigator, and negotiator and a confident advocate anywhere she went. She was the chief litigator who oversaw numerous rate cases and played a pivotal role in shutting down the toxic Benning Road power plant. She successfully fought against the proliferation of customer-owned pay phones, which had become magnets for drug trafficking in some neighborhoods.

She was at the helm during landmark decisions: Pepco's divestiture and sale of its power plants, the first Pepco acquisition, and the conversion to Pepco Holdings, Inc., that involved D.C. and four states: Maryland, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. Noel's reputation as a strong advocate for all D.C. ratepayers and consumers across the District is the hallmark of OPC's continued dedication and innovative advocacy today.

The Move to Restructure and Deregulate Utilities

Washington Gas Unbundles Gas Sales to Customers

In 1995, Washington Gas Light Company (WGL) filed the first of several proposals with the PSC that requested permission to change the way it conducted its business in D.C. WGL wanted to give natural gas customers of all classes the opportunity to choose how they wanted to obtain gas: whether that be from a supplier other than Washington Gas or WGL itself. WGL's tariffs proposed an unbundling of utility costs so that customers could see exactly how much and what they were paying for (the cost of gas, pipeline costs, delivery costs, etc.). The PSC approved WGL's proposed tariffs, which authorized a few big changes: Nonresidential customers could unbundle their charges, large commercial customers could purchase gas from third-party suppliers and receive separate delivery services from WGL, and the establishment of a program for residential gas customers to purchase gas from third-party suppliers and receive delivery service from WGL.[20] WGL's move to unbundle was meant to change its monopoly status: no longer would it provide bundled natural gas service but instead would offer a selection of unbundled services, which made for a more competitive market. WGL's customers could finally select a company other than Washington Gas as their natural gas provider. Even still, WGL continues to deliver gas to all consumers, regardless of who sells the commodity.

Electric Utilities' Restructuring and Divestiture

In December 1999, the District enacted the **Electric Retail Competition and Consumer Protection Act of 1999**, which marked the introduction of electric power sales by competitive or third-party energy suppliers (TPSs), which were not regulated by the PSC.[21]

Historically considered an "integrated utility," electric utilities were deregulated to separate the ownership of electricity generation, transmission, and distribution.

> **"Pepco was changed dramatically through the passage of the electric deregulation law in 1999 – as a part of that law, Pepco agreed to divest itself of its generating assets.... Then, Pepco simply became an electric distribution company. They no longer own[ed] generation... this was a fundamental change."**
>
> \- Ted Trabue, Commissioner, D.C. Public Service Commission

All these changes allowed consumers to choose who they would purchase their energy from, including from unregulated companies at market-based rates. This dynamic ultimately led the utilities to make efforts to consolidate so as to increase their market power – the opposite of what deregulation and retail competition were meant to achieve. Notable examples of such consolidation efforts are the Baltimore Gas & Electric Co. and Pepco's attempted merger in 1995 and, later in 2014, Exelon's renewed attempt to merge with Pepco. These mergers promised lower costs and improved service quality, but the reality was more complex: both consumers and advocates raised concerns about the promised savings, potential reductions in quality of service, and customer abuse.

Unfortunately, with the arrival of unregulated TPSs came unregulated energy supply costs. Making up 60%[22] of the electricity rate, these costs were not subject to Commission rate regulation, which, predictably, caused consumer costs to surge.

The Impact of Deregulation and Divestment on the Consumer

During early deregulation, even large customers in the District saw minimal benefits. People's Counsel Noel was tenacious, however, stressing the need for ratepayers to adapt to a changing landscape and arguing that regulators had limited authority to balance the public's interests in competitive energy supply rates. The Office urged consumers to make informed pricing decisions and implement energy-efficient practices like installing home insulation and replacing inefficient appliances.

Advocating for Prioritization of D.C. Residents

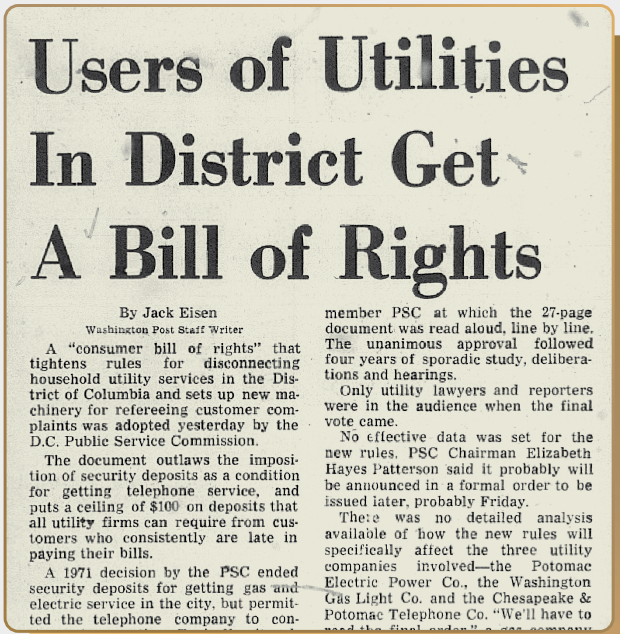
In a utility market characterized by growing retail competition, companies formerly headquartered in D.C. began merging with large organizations headquartered outside the District. Naturally, such changes left D.C. consumers at increased risk of deprioritization. These conditions prompted OPC to ensure that customer service for D.C. residents remained a priority for utility companies, but especially those whose central operations moved outside D.C.

Doubling Down on Consumer Priorities: The Consumer Bill of Rights

The concept of consumer protections has been evolving since the institution of OPC. Legislation became a tool that could be used to codify, safeguard, and adapt consumer rights, and in 1975, OPC wasted no time in proposing the Consumer Bill of Rights (CBOR). The PSC approved it in 1979 and issued an update in 2009. The outline of consumers' rights hasn't changed much since 1975, but the revision was necessary to incorporate new rules that address technological advances and the emergence of competitive energy and telecommunications providers. The CBOR educated consumers on their rights and gave them power to voice their concerns regarding utility services and providers.

Removal of Public Pay Telephones

Backed by rising concerns over the correlation between availability of public pay phones in certain District neighborhoods and escalating drug activity, OPC filed a petition on behalf of the citizens to request increased pay phone oversight. As a result, the PSC instituted rigorous regulations governing the installation and removal of public pay phones, which ended with the removal of 172 public pay phones from residential areas in 1992, addressing both safety and community concerns.[23]



Users of Utilities In District Get A Bill of Rights

By Jack Eisen
Washington Post Staff Writer

A "consumer bill of rights" that tightens rules for disconnecting household utility services in the District of Columbia and sets up new machinery for refereeing customer complaints was adopted yesterday by the D.C. Public Service Commission.

The document outlaws the imposition of security deposits as a condition for getting telephone service, and puts a ceiling of $100 on deposits that all utility firms can require from customers who consistently are late in paying their bills.

A 1971 decision by the PSC ended security deposits for getting gas and electric service in the city, but permitted the telephone company to con-

member PSC at which the 27-page document was read aloud, line by line. The unanimous approval followed four years of sporadic study, deliberations and hearings.

Only utility lawyers and reporters were in the audience when the final vote came.

No effective data was set for the new rules. PSC Chairman Elizabeth Hayes Patterson said it probably will be announced in a formal order to be issued later, probably Friday.

There was no detailed analysis available of how the new rules will specifically affect the three utility companies involved—the Potomac Electric Power Co., the Washington Gas Light Co. and the Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Co. "We'll have to

Verizon: Transition From Copper Wire to Fiber Optic

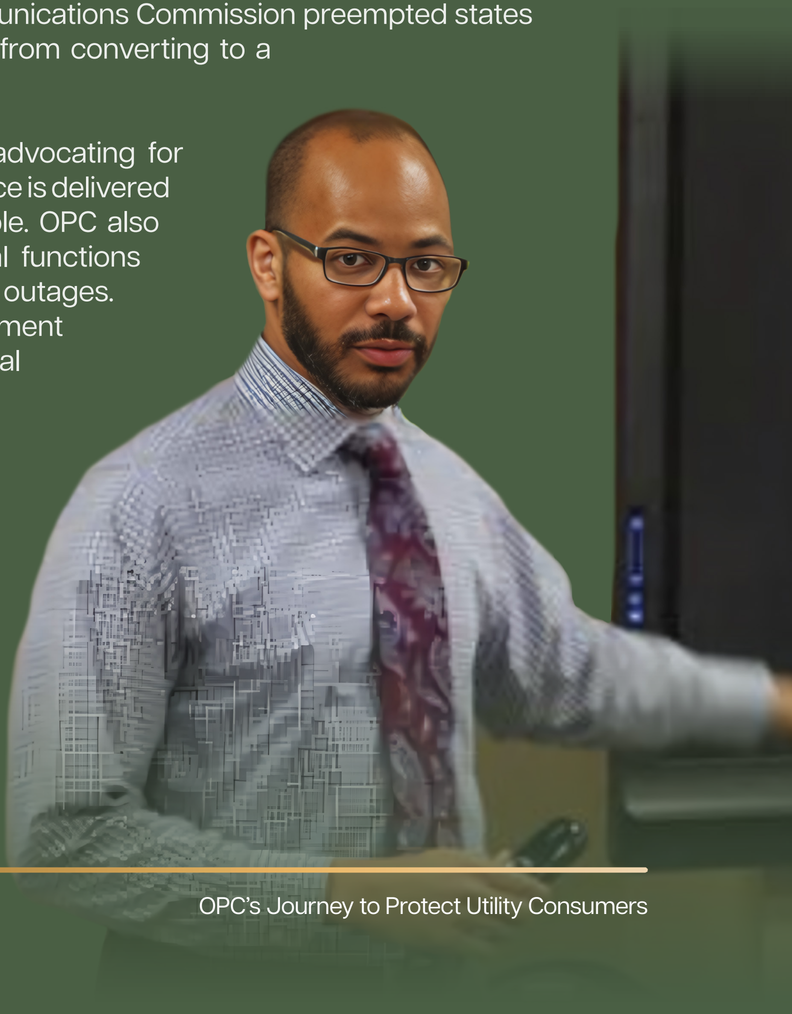
When Verizon began transitioning from copper wire telephone service to fiber-optic networks in 2013, the company cited issues with the reliability of copper wiring and the expense of maintenance as the reason for such a transition. While Verizon may have been right in their assessment about the long-term unreliability of copper wiring, consumers were concerned about service reliability and quality during the transition as well as removal of copper phone lines without prior notification. With such a huge transition, consumer needs can be easily forgotten. When issues like service outages, unreliability, infrastructure problems, and Verizon's marketing practices arose, OPC diligently investigated on the behalf of consumers.

"So, the movement from a telecommunication system that was based pretty much 99% on wires to one that is now probably based 98% on non-wires was a dramatic change in the landscape over the last 25 years."

Ted Trabue, Commissioner, D.C. Public Service Commission

This investigation prompted OPC to file a formal case in January 2013 with the Commission, examining Verizon's continued use of copper infrastructure and its approach to transitioning customers to a fiber-optic network.[24] This case was primarily driven by consumer complaints about the questionable marketing tactics Verizon had used to push them to switch to fiber-optic infrastructure, which customers said resulted in inferior service compared to that provided through the copper wiring. In 2015, the Federal Communications Commission preempted states from prohibiting local exchange carriers like Verizon from converting to a 100% fiber-optic network.[25]

OPC actively participated in the PSC proceedings, advocating for consumers' right to choose how their local phone service is delivered – whether that be via copper wire or fiber-optic cable. OPC also emphasized the importance of maintaining essential functions like 911 access and service reliability during power outages. Through this advocacy, OPC demonstrated its commitment to ensuring that consumers benefit from technological advancements and do not experience unreliable service as a result of technological transitions.



Pepco/Exelon: The Merger

One of OPC's most significant undertakings was its opposition in 2014 to the proposed merger between Pepco and the Chicago-based energy goliath Exelon Corporation, a company with revenues of $34.5 billion in 2015.[26] This acquisition was set to create the largest electric utility conglomerate in the world, to be headquartered in Chicago, upending the status quo for District ratepayers. In exchange, Exelon proposed to give D.C. consumers a financial offer of $15 million as added benefits, including rate increase protection in the form of a rate credit to Pepco's residential customers, low-income energy assistance, and more. Mattavous-Frye led a team of dedicated litigators and emphasized that OPC would not support any merger that did not outline clear benefits for consumers, such as rate relief, improved service reliability, training opportunities for D.C. residents, ring-fencing to protect D.C. consumers from Exelon's non-utility-related financial risks, and support for continued sustainability efforts in the city. The PSC agreed with OPC that Pepco/Exelon failed to demonstrate that the merger proposal was in the public interest because the proposal as filed provided excessive benefits to the company's shareholders and increased rates and risks to consumers. The PSC directed the parties to return to the settlement table.

OPC – joined by D.C.'s Office of the Attorney General, the Apartment and Office Building Association, and several federal agency intervenors – secured a settlement agreement with Pepco that increased the settlement proposal from $15 million to $72 million, more than five times the original proposal. Specifically, the settlement required Pepco to increase consumer cash payout benefits, adopt rate increase protections, assist residents who had low incomes, include commitments regarding renewable energy, and provide job training opportunities for D.C. residents. OPC was specific in its request regarding job training opportunities: Pepco/Exelon was required to open a workforce academy to train D.C. residents for skilled jobs in the utility industry. Mayor Muriel Bowser, Pepco/Exelon, and Washington Gas, per the settlement terms, created the DC Infrastructure Academy, which has trained more than 4,600 young men and women for skilled utility jobs since its opening.[27] The Academy is one of a few of its kind in the country.


SORRY, EXELON
THE PUBLIC IS
JUST SAY NO EXELON
OPPOSE


Starion Energy PA, Inc.
March 13, 2014
DATE
Pay to the Order of
Greater Washington Urban League
$ 100,000.00
One Hundred Thousand Dollars & 00/100 Dollars
For Special Energy Assistance
Authorized Signature

Combating Misinformation and Deceptive Tactics

New utility operations that wanted to enter a highly competitive market like D.C. did a lot of overpromising. This gave consumers a new challenge to contend with: deceptive marketing practices.

TPSs targeted low-income neighborhoods, promising lower utility prices. But many residents felt duped; it was one thing to expect to receive a high energy bill but quite another to receive such a bill when the TPSs had promised lower bills. The first series of consumer complaints OPC received was about a company called "Power Trust" in 2001. OPC investigated the complaints and confronted the company. Shortly thereafter, the company filed for bankruptcy and stopped doing business in the District.

Starion Energy: Third-Party Supplier Compliance and Settlement

By the time 2013 rolled around, the Consumer Services Division at OPC received a flood of complaints against TPSs engaging in unauthorized account switching, aggressive marketing, misrepresentation, and deception. OPC was quick to petition the PSC to conduct a comprehensive investigation into all TPS companies operating within the District, which paved the way for increased oversight of TPSs, including their compliance with PSC regulations.

Among the TPSs that the PSC investigated was Starion Energy, one of the most aggressive TPSs at the time — one that had been the subject of more than 250 complaints about deceptive marketing practices and increasingly higher bills. OPC petitioned the PSC to convene a hearing to investigate Starion's actions.

The Office's persistent efforts resulted in a settlement agreement between Starion Energy and OPC, part of which was a $100,000 contribution from Starion Energy to the Greater Washington Urban League's energy assistance program, which provides critical support to D.C.[28] residents who are having a tough time paying their energy bills.

One of the primary objectives of the settlement fund was to compensate consumers who had filed complaints about Starion's practices. The fund began serving consumers immediately after the settlement and successfully assisted 208 District consumers with their energy bills, which depleted the fund in two short months.

While the utility landscape in D.C. evolved and shifted through the years, one theme persisted through every administration: protecting consumers' rights to affordable utility rates. One of the consumers' most pressing concerns during this deregulation period was the prospect of rate increases. These increases, which were often driven by market competition factors — such as the need for new infrastructure to enhance reliability — and the effects of merger and acquisition activity, challenged the financial stability of many residents, particularly seniors, people with disabilities, and families who were already weathering economic downturn. In response to consumer concerns, OPC took decisive action to shield them from the consequences of skyrocketing rate increases.

Mayor Muriel Bowser and People's Counsel Sandra Mattavous-Frye recognize long-time OPC Consumer Outreach Specialist, Jean Gross-Bethel for service to the D.C. government.

Securing a More Sustainable Future

04

The Office of the People's Counsel (OPC) was championing clean energy as early as the 1980s. It recognized the potential environmental benefits of clean energy, yet it also understood the potential risks that technological advances posed to the ratepayers. OPC took a firm stance in defense of ratepayers' interests, believing that utility shareholders – not consumers – should bear the costs of progress and the burden of shaping a more sustainable environment.

One of OPC's early sustainability efforts focused on Integrated Resource Planning (IRP), which was introduced in 1986. This type of assessment requires utilities to develop energy plans that balance demand-side efficiency and supply-side options for low-cost energy provision. The Office procured significant savings for both residential and commercial ratepayers through its advocacy for effective conservation programs and the incorporation of energy-saving strategies into utilities' energy supply plans. OPC's approach served as a model for many other states, which have adopted similar IRP initiatives.

1988 Community involvement and uproar in 1988 halts construction of a Pepco generating plant at Benning Road.

2000 and 2010 Reliability of utilities plummets in D.C. due to natural calamities and aging infrastructure. Recession deals a heavy blow, increasing economic crises.

2008 OPC participates in legislative solutions to improve infrastructure, implement sustainable practices, and promote usage of clean energy, all while ensuring a safe, equitable, reliable, and affordable utility environment.

2011 Sandra Mattavous-Frye appointed the fifth People's Counsel in 2011.

OPC's fundamental mission remains the same – ensuring safe, reliable, and affordable utilities for all – but environmental concerns have risen to the forefront of its work. OPC's vision for sustainability goes beyond clean energy and seeks to ensure the environmental quality and climate resilience of utility systems all while safeguarding consumers from the undue financial burdens of building a more sustainable infrastructure for the future.

Community at the Forefront: Benning Road

In 1988, Pepco submitted a proposal to expand its power plant at Benning Road.[29] Concerned citizens, aware of the potential environmental and health risks of this proposed expansion, rallied in opposition. "I think [River Terrace] was targeted because they felt that they would have no opposition," said George Gurley, one of the most prominent community advocates, who noted that power plant generators spew hazardous emissions into the air that can cause cancer and respiratory problems. Gurley added, "Black people in this country have not been known to fight against environmental changes. They're out trying to get food on the table."[30]

Their position was clear: Black residents recognized the correlation between toxic pollution and the health and welfare of their families and said "No!" to a utility expansion that would ultimately harm them.

OPC was deeply involved in the community protest. The Consumer Services Division collaborated closely with community leaders to orchestrate an extensive public education campaign that included press conferences and rallies and sought to bolster public participation in the ratemaking process. As a result, hundreds of citizens offered their testimonies during four public hearings. The residents of the River Terrace community successfully opposed the construction of a Pepco generating plant at Benning Road, and this whole effort serves as a showcase of the profound influence that community engagement can have in shaping utility decisions.

The Fight Against Unsustainable Infrastructure

Between 2000 and 2010, power outages and service disruptions, exacerbated by ice storms and damaged overhead electricity lines, plagued the city. Natural disasters, such as Hurricane Isabel in 2003, tested the region's resilience. Then, although not a natural disaster, the 2008 recession hit D.C. hard, causing unemployment to spike and the real estate market to slow down. The unemployment rate was at an all-time high at 11.9% by the end of 2009.[31] These economic disturbances coincided with a rise in home energy rates and long-term issues of electric reliability and led to growing dissatisfaction among utility consumers. Complaints about energy services reached unprecedented levels in 2009 – and regarding Pepco alone, OPC received 1,670 complaints, which was the most the Office had ever received about the utility provider. Residents began showing up in full force at community hearings when utilities like Pepco began to demand rate increases: **"Rates have doubled over the past five years. They should go back to the rates at which they were, and ultimately, in fact, electric service and all utilities should be considered human rights, human needs, and [should be] provided for all people,"** said Ms. Sarah Sloan, a resident of Southeast D.C. Ward 8, added: **"Many of us have a lot of pride because we have a disability and because we're private people, and we will suffer by having our electricity shut off and try to use candles and heaters, and we may die because of that."** The re-emergence of electric reliability issues in 2010 as a leading issue was instigated by a severe heat wave that triggered power outages across the city. Recognizing the opportunity to step in on behalf of consumers, OPC advocated for increased reliability, quality of service, and affordability at this time. At a roundtable that the D.C. Council convened, OPC recommended that the Council include the consideration of service quality and reliability in utility proceedings and require public utilities to educate ratepayers on how they should submit claims for damages caused by a utility's operations. OPC challenged the utility companies to enhance their operations and advocated for investigations into reliability and service quality. The cost of ignoring improvements was too high.

OPC staff and D.C. residents after a utility town hall meeting.


OPC-DC
Office of the People's Counsel
ADVOCACY | EDUCATION | PROTECTION

Securing Energy Resilience for All: D.C.'s Undergrounding

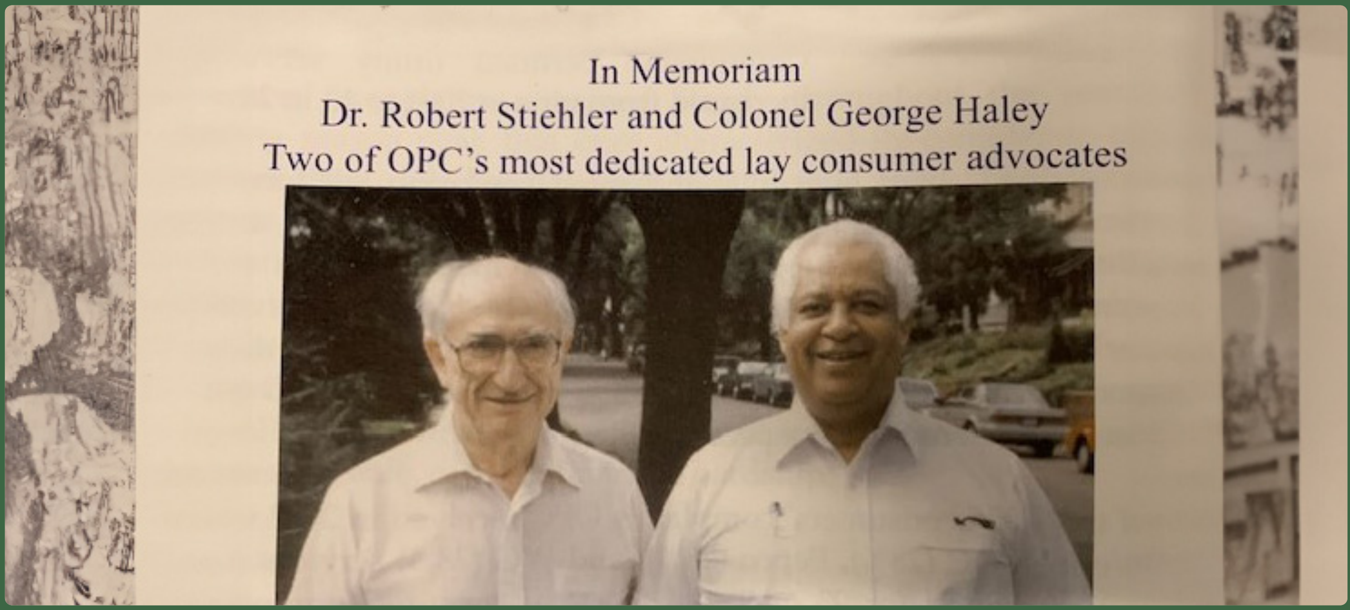
In 2012, former Mayor Vincent C. Gray formed a Power Line Undergrounding Task Force after a severe storm (a derecho) in 2012 caused prolonged power outages. D.C. City Administrator Allen Y. Lew (deceased) co-chaired this task force with Pepco Board Chairman Joseph Rigby. People's Counsel Mattavous-Frye was a voting member of this task force, which included Pepco, Washington Gas, the Public Service Commission (PSC) chair, D.C. Council members, the District Department of Transportation, and citizen representatives.

The storm exposed the city's energy infrastructure vulnerabilities and highlighted the importance of creating a more resilient infrastructure that protects consumers and provides the services they need when they need them. The task force proposed the DC PLUG initiative in response, an initiative that then-Mayor Gray called "a game changer" for the District's energy landscape.

Education and information dissemination were crucial for a successful DC PLUG implementation. To meet this challenge, OPC utilized its outreach program to inform and educate consumers about the initial plan and the coming changes. OPC's outreach staff met with the Advisory Neighborhood Commissions, community leaders, and other constituents and hosted events at various community locations, including places of worship, community centers, and schools, to engage the community and earn its buy-in. DC PLUG was going to cost, but OPC endeavored to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs to consumers. One way OPC advocated for program cost effectiveness was by working to ensure that customers who were receiving Pepco's Residential Aid Discount would not pay into the DC PLUG initiative's costs.

OPC also participated on the Underground Project Consumer Education Task Force, which Mayor Muriel Bowser established in 2015 to supplement the initial DC PLUG Consumer Education Plan. As a part of the amended initiative, Pepco was directed to file a Biennial Plan for 2017-2018, which included the DC PLUG Education Plan and a commitment to contract with local businesses and train and hire District residents.

DC PLUG was not the only transformative initiative in which the Office played a pivotal role. In 2013, the **Community Renewable Energy Amendment Act**[32] was signed into law, enabling the development of community renewable energy facilities at the distribution system level. In 2016, the **Renewable Portfolio Standard Expansion Amendment Act**[33] elevated renewable standards so that the District could pursue a greener and more resilient energy future. These legislative milestones marked significant progress toward a more sustainable energy future.



Playing a Role in the District's Sustainability Legislation

As the years passed, the importance of sustainability became plainer. D.C. made sustainability a top priority, as reflected in significant legislative initiatives and government actions, and OPC has been a frequent partner in shaping this legislation and keeping the consumers' needs front and center.

One such government action was the passage of the **Clean and Affordable Energy Act of 2008,**[34] which established the Sustainable Energy Trust Fund and the DC Sustainable Energy Utility (DCSEU), the central resource for energy efficiency and renewable energy programs and services for District residents and businesses. Because OPC is a statutory member of the DCSEU Advisory Board, it was involved in drafting the initial contract terms and Articles of Incorporation. The People's Counsel is, by law, mandated to serve on the board and continues to play an active role in shaping its structure, operations, and ongoing activities. The Office was also actively involved in the development of the **Sustainable D.C. Act of 2012** and the **Sustainable D.C. Omnibus Amendment Act of 2014**, both of which advance sustainability goals and initiatives in the District.

FIFTH PEOPLE'S COUNSEL

Sandra Mattavous-Frye (2011-present)

Currently, OPC is headed by Sandra Mattavous-Frye. Her three-decade-long career at OPC began with an internship prior to graduating from Antioch School of Law in 1983, and culminated with her appointment as the People's Counsel in 2011.

She has held five leadership positions in her career and is guided by the CARE model (consumer empowerment, affordability, reliability, and energy efficiency and sustainability). One thing she has been consistent on throughout her career is her advocacy for ratepayers, regardless of the critical issue at hand – like utility regulatory transitions, deregulation, and emerging competition. She has championed smart grid development, energy efficiency, conservation management, and consumer rights.

Mattavous-Frye has received numerous awards and accolades in recognition of her outstanding achievements and commitment to improving the utility landscape for everyday consumers. These awards include the 2021 Robert F. Manifold Lifetime Service Award from the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates, the highest honor awarded for dedication to public service; the Advocate of the Year Award from Antioch School of Law; and the State Regulatory Practitioner Award from the Energy Bar Association. Under her leadership, OPC has played a crucial role in a number of initiatives, including the formation of the DCSEU, DC Power Line Undergrounding initiative, the Washington Gas Light Accelerated Pipeline Replacement Project, and the DC Infrastructure Academy, which was included in the Pepco/Exelon merger settlement. Her dedication to ratepayers has ensured that these programs will provide measurable benefits to the residents of D.C.

Sandra Mattavous-Frye has stewarded OPC well. The progress she has initiated was only possible because of the cornerstones that the four previous People's Counsels laid. OPC's entire history is a story of dedicated service and tireless advocacy, and Mattavous-Frye's vision has always been to ensure that the voiceless have a voice and that the powerful are held accountable

Mattavous-Frye's proudest achievement is a series of "first-ever initiatives and unprecedented consumer victories": the 2012 Climate Change Symposium at the University of the District of Columbia Law School; the 2013 establishment of a city-wide energy efficiency DIY training for consumers that involved simple conservation demonstrations; the negotiation of a $100,000 settlement with Starion, a third-party supplier (TPS) accused of using abusive sales tactics; formulation of a 2017 senior study and focus group to identify issues directly affecting senior citizens; establishment of conservation demonstrations for community groups; and the commissioning of a 2020 Energy Affordability Study and a 2022 Water Affordability Study. D.C. and other national organizations have used OPC's data, which indicates the quality of data that OPC collects. In 2023, Mattavous-Frye also convened the first city-wide Youth Climate Change Summit. OPC will continue down the path that the People's Counsel set it on, and Mattavous-Frye's commitment will shape the Office as it strives to meet the ever-evolving needs of utility consumers in the District of Columbia.

In 2012, the D.C. Council established a new environment mandate, which drove Mattavous-Frye's establishment of a dedicated Energy Efficiency and Sustainability (EES) Section at OPC. This mandate requires OPC to "consider public safety, the economy, conservation of natural resources, and environmental preservation when dealing with public utility or energy companies."[35] OPC's EES Section was created to promote awareness of energy efficiency and to educate consumers across all income levels and wards about renewable energy programs, sustainable energy options, practical energy-saving measures, and innovative developments. OPC staff members have conducted hands-on workshops at hundreds of civic associations, community organizations, senior centers, houses of worship, schools, and parent groups to demonstrate energy-efficient products and share with consumers simple tips on how to save energy and money on utility bills. OPC wants to empower consumers to participate in these advancements, develop relevant legal and policy positions that benefit ratepayers, and engage with key stakeholders.

With the passage of the **CleanEnergy DC Omnibus Amendment Act of 2018**, D.C. set its intentions to advance and meet its environmental goals. This new law established D.C. as a national and global leader in implementing sustainability efforts and combating climate change. OPC, which had been championing such policies for decades, embraced this advance and dedicated its efforts to ensure the sustainability of all infrastructure investments aligned with current environmental policies, and equitable use of ratepayer funds.

The effects of climate change had already begun to affect the District. It was necessary to implement both mitigation and adaptation strategies. Building on Sustainable DC 1.0, Mayor Muriel Bowser's **Sustainable DC 2.0**[36] plan in 2018 emphasized the crucial necessity for balance among environmental, economic, and social needs.

When OPC makes policy decisions, it emphasizes the achievement of the District's sustainability goals. Specifically, OPC proposes initiatives and supporting programs that reduce per capita energy use, encourage the production of clean and renewable energy, and ensure that ratepayers benefit from modernization of the energy infrastructure. OPC also makes it a point to advocate for smart meter use, grid improvements, and enhanced energy reliability and resilience, and they hold the city accountable by reviewing the city's emissions annual reports and utility-filed reports of methane gas leaks.

OPC's Holistic Vision for Sustainability: A Safe, Equitable, Reliable, and Affordable Utility Environment

Ensuring a Safe Consumer Environment

Over the years, utilities have proposed expansions and changes that put consumers' safety and environmental health at risk – such is the tune of progress. Their top priority isn't the consumer, unfortunately. In fulfillment of its role, OPC has stayed on top of these cases to advocate for reduced rate increases and prioritization of consumer safety in utility expansion measures.

Tackling Gas Rate Hikes, Reliability, and Safety: Washington Gas Light Company and AltaGas Merger

In 2018, AltaGas, a Canadian utility company, and the Washington Gas Light company (WGL) initiated a merger proposal. OPC recognized that this merger would fail to serve the public interest and posed financial risks to consumers – including increased consumer service costs and rates.

After extensive negotiations, OPC secured benefits for consumers to the tune of a $20.5 million WGL rate credit, $6 million for workforce development initiatives, creation of a workforce academy that trained young D.C. residents for jobs in the utility field, financial support for the District's clean energy goals, a one-time bill credit, and a two-year rate freeze, improved system reliability, and commitments to repair portions of the infrastructure to reduce gas leaks. AltaGas also pledged $4.2 million[37] in assistance for low-income residents in regard to affordable housing and emergency utility bill assistance.

Investigating Dangerous Gas Leaks: PROJECTpipes and WGL Gas Leaks

WGL has a multiyear plan to upgrade portions of its aging gas infrastructure called PROJECTpipes. It is a multibillion-dollar plan that has existed since 2014 and is scheduled to be completed over the next two decades. OPC has actively participated in this project and repeatedly raised concerns about the associated cost and safety. In early 2024, OPC filed a petition with the Commission, requesting a pause for PROJECTpipes to 1) ensure it is consistent with the city's climate goals, 2) to ensure WGL is using the proper modeling software to identify leaks, and 3) to scale back many of the proposed projects to make it less expensive.

Petition to Investigate, WGL's Infrastructure

In April 2021 and 2022, OPC filed petitions with the PSC, requesting that they conduct a comprehensive review of WGL's infrastructure – including the company's failure to reduce Grade 2 leaks as required by the order approving the merger of WGL and AltaGas. The PSC denied both requests.

On February 14, 2024, the Office filed a third petition. In this petition, OPC staff referenced a letter from members of the D.C. Council, which stated that PROJECTpipes is not consistent with the city's climate future. In addition, OPC's review of leak data showed that the number of Grade 1 leaks, the most dangerous leaks, were increasing. OPC argued that these reasons alone were compelling enough to initiate an investigation of WGL's entire infrastructure to ensure its safety and consistency with the city's evolving climate needs.

On February 23, 2024, the PSC extended PROJECTpipes for one year to provide WGL the opportunity to repair the riskiest pipes while the PSC and other stakeholders determine whether to move forward with the project.

Utility Improvements Causing Negative Impact: Pepco Construction Investigation

In 2021, OPC received numerous complaints from homeowners in Takoma Park, particularly along Eastern Avenue, NW, regarding damage allegedly caused by nearby Pepco construction work. Approximately 18 homeowners sought damages and raised concerns about noise and vibrations coming from the construction site. Despite previous attempts to resolve issues with Pepco and making efforts to contact the media for help, homeowners were left unsatisfied.

OPC acted by hiring an engineering firm to investigate the damage reports independently. Based on the engineering investigation's findings, OPC filed a petition with the PSC on October 14, 2021, to investigate whether Pepco adhered to proper construction practices, address potential cost allocation to ratepayers, and establish protocols to prevent future damage in Takoma Park[38] and other neighborhoods.

Pepco countered this petition by stating that the construction was part of the Capital Grid Project and requested that the PSC dismiss the petition. Ultimately, on April 7, 2022, the PSC declined to initiate an investigation into Pepco's construction practices, citing the company's claim that qualified firms that follow industry standards conducted the work and suggesting that the evaluation of construction cost allocation should occur in a rate increase case evaluation. OPC continues to monitor the number and frequency of construction-related complaints and intends to make consumer losses an issue the PSC should consider when Pepco requests a rate increase.

Ensuring Equal and Reliable Access to Sustainable Energy Solutions

OPC is driven by the belief that a sustainable and equitable energy future is not only possible but essential for the well-being of every D.C. resident, regardless of their income or social status.

With a vision of energy efficiency in mind, OPC embarked on a mission to expand access to renewable energy options across the city. Outreach staff took the agency's message directly to the heart of the community, engaging with local organizations and places of worship with the goal of informing consumers – especially those in underserved neighborhoods – on the advantages of adopting solar energy production and use.

One example of fruitful community impact is the pivotal role OPC's outreach specialist has played in guiding churches toward greater energy efficiency, including Walker Memorial Baptist in Ward 1, St. Luke Baptist in Ward 4, Liberty Baptist in Ward 6, and Sargent Memorial Presbyterian Church in Ward 7.

As energy technology has expanded, so has opportunity. In 2016, OPC initiated the groundbreaking **Value of Solar Study,**[39] fulfilling a directive from the D.C. Council to assess emerging energy alternatives for residential consumers. With the rising popularity of solar energy and the District's focus on providing solar resources, OPC recognized the need for an assessment of D.C.'s solar potential and its costs and benefits. The study had two central components: first, an evaluation of the solar capacity and value for the entire District, and second, an examination of solar accessibility issues for those with low incomes. The findings were presented to the D.C. Council and the public in April 2017, with the goal of informing policies that enhance solar opportunities across all eight District wards.

OPC also secured a grant, in collaboration with the national nonprofit coalition Clean Energy States Alliance, that would support the development of tools designed to identify prime locations for solar production in D.C. Using the tools developed, OPC planned to keep ratepayers, policymakers, and stakeholders abreast of solar and other renewable energy technologies as they become integrated onto the grid.

Protecting Consumer Savings from Pepco Community Solar

In 2015, the D.C. government initiated a groundbreaking project, Solar for All, the purpose of which was to bring solar energy to 100,000 low- to moderate-income families in the District and reduce the electricity bills by half for 15 years of residents earning less than 80% of the area median income. The solar panels were provided free of cost to consumers.

Approximately 5,000 community solar subscribers received power generated from the Solar for All program. Solar panels placed on community buildings generated for residents the benefits of solar power without requiring residents to own or pay for expensive solar panels. However, in 2022, a significant issue arose when complaints came in regarding how Pepco had been handling community solar generation in D.C. Pepco argued it had the right to install its own meters at community solar facilities to calculate the solar credits owed to the community, but OPC and D.C.'s Office of the Attorney General disagreed. They filed a joint complaint with the Commission, calling for Pepco to rectify its mishandling of the community's solar metering.

The PSC disagreed with Pepco's argument. It ruled that Pepco's approach violated D.C. law and stated that Pepco must rely on the meters that the solar facility owners had installed. Pepco's meters were found to significantly undercount the solar generation, which resulted in fewer solar energy credits owed to community solar subscribers.

Pepco's mishandling of community solar was an obstacle to D.C.'s carbon emissions reduction goals, a clean energy transition, and the Solar for All program. It was a hindrance for consumers, especially those with low incomes, to transition to clean energy as required by law.[40] Ultimately, the PSC held Pepco accountable for violating solar program management regulations and required Pepco to refund approximately $800,000 to ratepayers. Pepco opposed the refund amount, so the PSC ordered an audit to determine the correct amount.

Senior Outreach and Working with AARP, the Office on Aging, and the Commission on Aging

Many ratepayers, particularly seniors, are vulnerable to the deceptive practices of some TPSs. To combat this problem, OPC — through a D.C. Council mandate — conducted an outreach and education initiative in 2016[41] that targeted senior utility consumers who were experiencing service issues. Armed with information that the senior consumers provided, OPC presented its findings to the PSC and launched a Senior Outreach, Awareness and Energy Efficiency Education campaign for the senior community. These educational efforts covered critical elements of consumer protection, such as TPS red flags, utility scams, energy efficiency, clean energy alternatives, and solar adoption.

Romaine Thomas, a former three-term chair of the D.C. Commission on Aging and leader of AARP Retired Educators of America, emphasized the importance of organizations like OPC that act with "compassion, commitment, and creativity" in its efforts to protect seniors and help them understand utility regulations. Herbert Jones, a former OPC outreach manager, of AARP also officially recognized OPC's comprehensive senior education program, acknowledging its role in safeguarding seniors from scams and ensuring they have necessary information about utility services.

Ensuring Fair Consumer Costs

Since its inception, OPC has advocated for cost-effective strategies, prioritized consumer education, and fought to advocate for savings to be passed on to consumers while insisting improvement costs be borne by utility shareholders rather than the unsuspecting ratepayer.

Washington Gas Anacostia River Cleanup

In 1992, a legal battle erupted when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) initiated a hefty fine against Pepco for hazardous material storage violations at its Benning Road facility due to a lack of required permits. Washington Gas wanted to sell a former gas plant along the Anacostia River. In 1992,[42] they sought to recover environmental cleanup expenses through utility rate hikes to get the property ready for sale, according to new environmental regulations. OPC did not oppose the cleanup but did contest passing the costs to consumers, asserting that the company was responsible for the costs that they incurred by their negligent handling of hazardous waste. The concerns didn't stop there: Even if the rates were increased, the Office didn't want ratepayers to fund a cleanup that they would not benefit from. The PSC did end up deciding to allow Washington Gas to use utility rate increases to recover the cleanup costs. However, the PSC also ruled that Washington Gas had to share the profits from the sale of the property — which would eventually become Maritime Plaza — with ratepayers.[43]

Benning Road and Pepco's Rate Case and Multiyear Rate Plan

In 1992, a legal battle erupted when the EPA initiated a hefty fine against Pepco for hazardous material storage violations at its Benning Road facility due to a lack of required permits. In the decades that followed the beginning of the Benning Road fiasco, Pepco's operations led to spills, equipment leaks, and deliberate releases of hazardous substances, including the highly toxic polychlorinated biphenyls. These pollutants have caused lasting damage to the environment and public health.

Finally, Pepco shuttered its Benning Road facility in 2012, and by 2017, they had reached a settlement agreement to address the cleanup costs. Pepco agreed it would not seek recovery of these costs from ratepayers. However, Pepco still attempted to include these expenses in a $53 million rate increase application in 2019. OPC voiced strong opposition and argued at the Court of Appeals that the PSC should not allow Pepco to recover from its customers $2 million in cleanup costs. In a significant triumph, the court ruled in favor of OPC, rejecting the PSC's decision to allow ratepayers to shoulder these costs because such recovery efforts violated the 2017 settlement agreement.[44]

These victories were pivotal steps toward achieving environmental justice and highlight the impact that community involvement and regulatory oversight can have in shaping utility decisions — all in the name of preserving the environment and the public's well-being.

Passing Savings onto Ratepayers – Pepco Rate Case: Post–Tax Cuts and Jobs Act

In 2017, Pepco sought to increase retail rates for its electricity distribution service, which prompted the PSC to initiate a rate proceeding in 2018 to examine the impact of the federal **Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA)** on Pepco's revenue requirements.[45] Like the federal Tax Reform Act of 1986, the passage of the TCJA was a good opportunity for OPC to seek rate reductions. The tax cuts benefited Pepco, which meant their savings could be passed on to ratepayers. This accord delivered a substantial $24.1 million rate reduction to Pepco's customers, a sizable portion of which was attributed to the TCJA.[46]

In addition to the rate reduction, OPC secured an $8 million enhancement to the residential customer rate credit that was initially negotiated in the Pepco/Exelon merger. These combined benefits translated into a remarkable four-year freeze on residential customer bills. OPC's unwavering dedication to securing a fair settlement alleviated the financial burden on ratepayers and provided further proof of the agency's commitment to safeguarding consumers' interests and ensuring just utility rates.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Responding to the Changing Cries of the People

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Change is a constant companion in the District. Between July 1, 2022, and July 1, 2023, alone, approximately 8,023[47] new residents poured into its communities. Job growth surged at a remarkable rate and is projected to increase by 7.6%[48] through 2026. With each new resident, job, and business, the demand on city services, including utilities, escalates. The new era brought with it increased demands on the aging utility infrastructure and real-time exposure to the impacts of human-made climate change, and it exacerbated the residents' health and welfare situations. The Office of the People's Counsel (OPC) recognized that change was necessary to accommodate the needs of a changing city.

2018 OPC is granted responsibility for representing D.C.'s water consumers in issues regarding service termination, billing, and quality issues.

2019 D.C.'s aggressive clean energy act in 2018 spurs OPC's study on "Equity Assessment of Electrification Incentives in the District of Columbia," a roadmap to a just energy future.

2020 Global pandemic rattles the world. OPC takes immediate action in pushing for legislation that safeguards consumer rights to utility service amid dire circumstances.

2021 Climate Action Section is formed within OPC to balance rising energy consumption with climate goals and to chart a sustainable path forward.

A New Dawn for Water Consumer Protection: OPC Comes to the Rescue for DC Water Consumers

DC Water customers had long voiced their dissatisfaction with soaring rates, perplexing billing practices, and complicated complaint and dispute procedures. In 2018, a storm of consumer discontent brewed over increases to DC Water's Clean Rivers Impervious Area Charge (CRIAC) that were a result of the escalating costs of the Clean Rivers Project. The D.C. Council passed the DC Water Consumer Protection Amendment Act of 2018. This legislation marked a pivotal moment: OPC was granted the responsibility of representing and advocating on behalf of D.C.'s water consumers. Prior to this legislative change, customers who were experiencing water-related issues had to turn to DC Water itself – the sole retail water supplier – for resolutions.

The legislation enabled the Office to step in when consumers faced threats of water service termination, giving it the authority to work to negotiate payment arrangements and forestall disconnections. This new responsibility aligned seamlessly with OPC's broader mission of consumer advocacy and education, and OPC could capitalize on its extensive experience with brokering resolutions for consumers of electricity, natural gas, and local phone services.

In April 2019, OPC officially opened the doors of the Water Services Division (WSD), filling a critical void in DC Water customer service. The division wasted no time in representing water ratepayers at hearings, saving property owners substantial sums through bill adjustments.

While DC Water retained self-regulation and decision-making authority concerning its rates, OPC now possessed the authority to represent consumers who had complaints about service, rates, and billing. OPC was also granted the authority to comment on DC Water rate proposals, further extending its capacity to safeguard consumer interests. Among these changes, OPC was also responsible for educating water consumers about their legal rights and responsibilities and ensuring they were well-informed.

The WSD swiftly became a beacon of hope for those facing disconnections, exorbitant bills, water leaks, and other water-related concerns. WSD began to make a substantial difference in the lives of residents. But OPC's initiative did not end there, however. The Office worked with the D.C. Council to create emergency legislation that would allow low-income DC Water residential customers with outstanding balances to seek financial assistance from the CRIAC Assistance Fund.

"I'm a 94-year-old World War II veteran. When I called the People's Counsel, I had been without water for just over two weeks. When you grow old like me, there's only so much you can do ... It was psychologically damaging to be without the basics of life such as water and heat. Bottom line is that OPC helped make me whole. Once they explained the situation to DC Water, they teamed up and produced a solution. They helped me get this bill down. People like me need help. We're not trying to beat the system. We just need a hand."

- Dr. Horatio Harris, Ward 5 property owner

Water Services Division Makes a Difference:
Early Wins

In the short span of one year, WSD achieved remarkable results, negotiating more than $92,000 in bill credits and adjustments[49] for DC Water customers, for example. The division has represented consumers in more than 2,600 consumer complaints to date. The division also contributed to the creation of a Water Bill of Rights and the update of the D.C. Municipal Regulations, which ensure that consumers' rights are recognized and upheld.

Overcoming the Consequences of a Global Pandemic

When COVID-19 spread across the globe, no city was left untouched. The circumstances in which the District of Columbia found itself were not unique, but they were unprecedented. The impacts of this crisis were profound, reverberating through every corner of society – but they were felt acutely within the realm of utility services.

As the pandemic began to unfold, Mayor Muriel Bowser declared a state of emergency and a public health emergency in March 2020, which was followed by a mandatory lockdown. The imposition of lockdowns and social distancing measures had profound effects across the local economy. Between March and April 2020, the D.C. area witnessed the loss of over 300,000 "non-farm" jobs – more than the number lost during the entirety of the Great Recession a decade earlier. Unemployment rates skyrocketed, surging from just over 3% to almost 10% in a single month.[50]

In the face of such widespread job loss and economic uncertainty, many residents struggled to pay their utility bills. Utility usage increased amid lowered income and heightened utility prices, which placed immense pressure on households already facing financial hardship.

OPC's Swift Response: Pandemic Moratorium Legislation

Recognizing the dire circumstances facing utility consumers, OPC took immediate action. The People's Counsel wrote letters[51] to each utility president, requesting that they suspend disconnections during the emergency, and worked with the D.C. Council to enact crucial legislation in March, April, and May that was designed to safeguard consumers during their hour of need. This response led to the following pieces of legislation, all of which were enacted in quick succession:

COVID-19 Response Emergency Amendment Act of 2020[52]
This pivotal legislation prohibited utility companies from disconnecting electric, gas, and water services due to nonpayment of bills or late fees during a public health emergency, and it continued to provide protection for 15 calendar days after the state of emergency was lifted.

COVID-19 Response Supplemental Emergency Act of 2020[53]
Building on the protections for utility customers, this act extended safeguards for telecommunications services. It barred providers from disconnecting, suspending, or degrading basic services in response to nonpayment of bills, fees for service or equipment, and other charges. This legislation also applied to cable operators.

Coronavirus Support Emergency Amendment Act of 2020[54]
Recognizing the long-term economic impact of the pandemic, this act mandated that utilities offer payment plans extending at least one year to eligible customers upon request. Furthermore, it prohibited companies from reporting delinquencies to credit agencies and barred them from requiring lump-sum payments under payment plans. These provisions ensured that services would not be disconnected for nonpayment if a customer adhered to the terms of their payment plan. Consumers who were denied a payment plan were encouraged to contact OPC and the Public Service Commission (PSC) for assistance. This legislation was a lifeline for those struggling to keep up with their utility bills.

Unfortunately, the financial fallout of the pandemic continued to have a negative impact beyond the initial resolutions. While moratoriums prevented disconnections during the public health emergency, mounting bill debt remained a significant concern, posing a long-term challenge for many households. OPC asked the utilities to establish flexible payment plans for consumers with high bills and to forestall disconnections when possible.

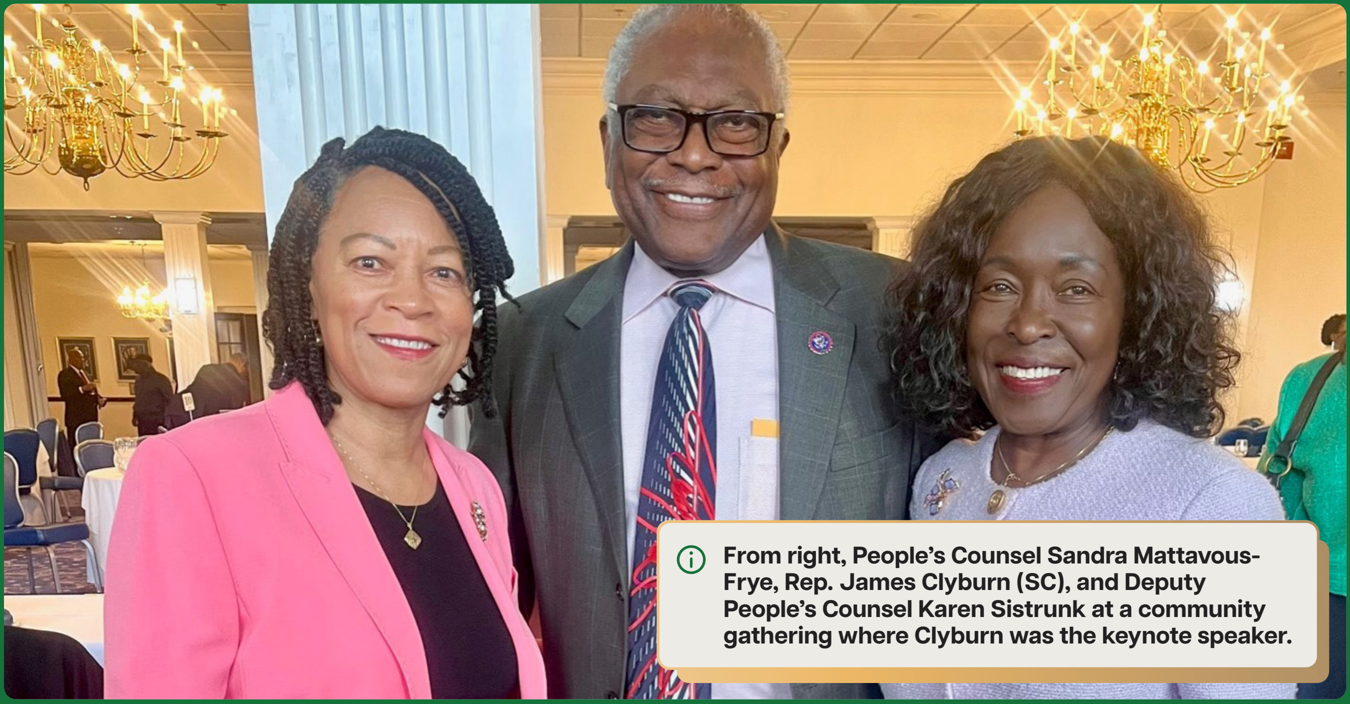
A Case in Point: Washington Gas Light Company Rate Case

Amid the lingering economic impact of the pandemic, Washington Gas Light Company (WGL) filed a request with the PSC in April 2022 to increase natural gas rates by $53 million. If approved, this rate hike would have translated to a 20.4% increase in the average residential gas bill, amounting to approximately $16.48 per month. OPC, consistent with its commitment to consumer advocacy, swiftly responded.[55]

In its brief to the PSC, OPC staunchly opposed WGL's rate proposals, citing their unjust and unreasonable nature. OPC argued that this request would unreasonably shift the risks to ratepayers for costs that might not align with the District's future climate goals.

The PSC eventually approved the rate increase in December 2023. WGL was granted a $24.6 million rate hike, despite consumers' economic struggles. However, because of OPC's intervention in the case, the increase was nearly 50% lower than what WGL originally requested – but it was still a staggering amount in light of everything that had happened in the years prior. On another note, OPC achieved a decisive victory for consumers when the PSC rejected WGL's request to include two proposals they alleged were climate action initiatives. WGL did not show that the programs provided equitable benefits for consumers or advanced the District's climate action goals, however, and thus they were rejected.

The aftermath of the pandemic continues to cast a long shadow, yet OPC remains steadfast in its commitment to responding to the changing cries of the people in the District of Columbia.



From right, People's Counsel Sandra Mattavous-Frye, Rep. James Clyburn (SC), and Deputy People's Counsel Karen Sistrunk at a community gathering where Clyburn was the keynote speaker.

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Ensuring an Equitable and Sustainable Future

The District has committed to reduce total greenhouse gas emissions (i.e., climate change pollution) by 60% of baseline emission levels by 2030 and to reach net-zero emissions by 2045. However, infrastructure updates and energy dependency patterns must change if the city is to realize these goals. After the D.C. Council approved the **CleanEnergy DC Omnibus Amendment Act of 2018**[56] – one of the country's most aggressive and impactful clean energy actions to date – the PSC recognized the need for stakeholders to file electrification studies. These studies would be able to identify potential pathways to reduce emissions while considering the equity implications of current and future decarbonization efforts. The commitment to realizing a sustainable and equitable energy future was exemplified through an OPC-commissioned critical study, the "Equity Assessment of Electrification Incentives in the District of Columbia."

The Office seized this opportunity to champion not just the rights of consumers but also the accessibility of renewable energy in vulnerable communities that are already grappling with the mounting pressure of rising energy costs.

Equitable Electrification: Bridging the Gap

The OPC-commissioned report,[57] prepared in December 2021 by the Applied Economics Clinic (AEC), marked a significant milestone in the pursuit of a more sustainable and equitable energy future. This study delved into the concept of "equitable electrification," a phrase that describes a gradual transition away from fossil fuels while also considering the layers of impact of such a move. Electrification involves switching from the use of fossil fuel–powered stoves, boilers, cars, and buses to those that run on electricity.

To ensure that electrification programs benefited the District's most vulnerable residents, OPC worked closely with AEC to establish a D.C.-specific definition for "environmental justice community." These include communities that are more likely to be near environmental hazards, are disproportionately exposed to air pollution, and withstand the worst of climate change. Demographic analysis revealed that a staggering 27% of the District's total population resided within environmental justice communities.

Understanding the Energy Burden

These studies underscored yet another stark reality: the glaring inequity in the distribution of energy costs. While households of varying sizes and energy consumption patterns paid the same energy rates, households with lower incomes bore the burden of disproportionate costs. For instance, higher-income households spent 2.4% of their annual income on energy costs, whereas lower-income households spent a staggering 7.2% of their annual income on energy costs, leaving less for other essential expenses. To put it in hard numbers, the same $300 energy bill for two households earning $50,000 and $150,000, respectively, highlights the potential impact of such a disparity.

A deeper dive revealed that 1 in 14 District residents fell into the category of "severely" energy-burdened, which is defined as paying more than 10% of their income toward energy expenses. These findings were alarming and begged the question of who exactly would pick up the bill to convert and modernize the energy systems for a more sustainable future.

A Call for Equitable Electrification

Wards 7 and 8, which have the lowest median incomes, are often at the forefront of these challenges. These areas frequently contend with extreme poverty rates, soaring energy expenditures, a significant minority population, and reliance on government assistance programs and are populated by a high proportion of renters and those who have lower rates of college degree attainment.

OPC does not consider "equitable electrification" a buzzword; for the Office, it is a call to action that demands a fair distribution of implementation efforts and associated costs. This fairness extends to all District communities, though there is a particular focus on marginalized communities that face the greatest barriers to and burdens of decarbonization efforts. In combating climate change, OPC has always believed equity must be at the heart of any solution. The residents of D.C. deserve easy access to clean, sustainable ways to power their homes, use public transportation, and drive without exacerbating climate change. However, the impact that environmental injustice has on vulnerable communities is alarming and demands immediate attention.

A Vision for a Just, Equitable, and Resilient Future

OPC's study concluded with a set of priorities and recommended equity metrics aimed at not only the PSC but all District agencies. The recommendations ensure that the agencies keep these underserved communities top of mind when they make any electrification investments or program implementations, which is a vital step toward creating a more just, equitable, affordable, and resilient energy future for all D.C. residents.

A Glimpse Into the Future: OPC's Commitment to the Next Generation

As OPC continues its relentless pursuit of justice and equity in the utility services arena, it is taking things forward to the next generation. OPC recognizes that protecting the interests of future generations is not just a responsibility but a moral imperative.

In 2020, the Office created a Climate Action Section and is actively involved in all city and federal proceedings impacting the District's environment and climate. OPC believes consumer buy-in is necessary and so includes everyday consumers in advocacy conversations to help them understand their role in combating climate change. In the spring of 2023, OPC hosted the "Our Planet, Our Future - An OPC Youth Climate Summit." This summit marked a significant milestone in the Office's commitment to empowering the youth and engaging communities in the fight against climate change.

People's Counsel Sandra Mattavous-Frye delivered a powerful message to the public that set the tone for the summit:

> **"There are no easy answers to combating climate change but there are solutions that can help make our communities stronger and healthier. All of us must do our part to advance these solutions. And consumers must fully participate in opportunities that bring them to the table to contribute their ideas and express their concerns."**

Her words resonated with all who share a concern for the environment and a desire to make a difference.

Through the summit, OPC aimed to connect industry experts, national and local officials, utility partners, community representatives, and media influencers with young adults, acknowledging their pivotal role in influencing movements for climate action. OPC sought to empower young individuals to find their role in the fight against climate change, encouraging them to use their voices as catalysts for change within their communities.

As we head toward a future of increasing climate uncertainty and instability, OPC is indispensable as a dedicated and responsive consumer advocate. The landscape of utility consumers' needs will keep changing. And, with that, OPC will continue to evolve, answer their cries, and work tirelessly to secure a more sustainable and equitable future for all.

OPC's vision is clear: to forge a path toward a just, affordable, sustainable, and resilient future where the environment is protected, communities thrive, and the legacy left for future generations is one of hope, action, and positive change.


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