

Outage reveals need for generator

Written by Mark Jaeger

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Village departments had to scramble for options when early-morning storm left community in the dark

A recent summer lightning storm left much of the Village of Fredonia in the dark for about four hours, but village officials are saying that power outage proved to be quite illuminating.

Village officials discussed the Saturday, July 23, outage during last Thursday's Village Board meeting and came to a singular conclusion — the village needs a portable generator to better cope with similar emergencies.

Wastewater Treatment Plant Supt. Gary Buntrock said he began receiving automated phone calls alerting him that the power was out at the village's two lift stations around 4 a.m. Every hour the power was out, another round of calls came in.

The village has two dedicated generators — one at the treatment plant and one at the fire station. Two gas-powered pumps are also available.

Buntrock said the treatment plant generator, which runs on natural gas, allowed the facility to continue processing wastewater as it flowed into the plant during and after the storm.

However, he said the water-cooled generator had to be watched closely to make sure it didn't overheat.

"The generator certainly proved its value that day, but learned if we run too much stuff from it for too long, it has a tendency to overheat. We had to keep an eye on it," Buntrock said.

That backup power equipment was of no use at the lift stations, leaving sections of the community at risk of sewer backups during the outage.

There was also no power available to pump water from the wellhouses to the municipal water tower.

"If there had been a fire, we wouldn't have been able to provide a whole lot of water," Buntrock said.

Public Works Director Al Neumann said that lack of flexibility has put the village in a precarious spot when the power goes out for an extended period of time.

"We have been rolling the dice. There has always been a need for a portable generator," Neumann told trustees.

At one time, he said the village had a 1953-vintage U.S. Air Force surplus generator in its equipment arsenal, which was acquired from the county.

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“The problem was you needed a Ph.D. to get it started. We limped along with that for a number of years, but it got to a point where it was leaking fluids faster than you could pour it into it,” Neumann said.

He said that generator had been shipped off to a repair shop two years ago, but added, “it is doubtful it will every start again.”

Neumann said there were plans to include the price of a new generator in the improvements that were to be paid for by the developer of the Village Green subdivision on the east side of Highway 57.

Several years ago, the village projected it would need a 125 kilowatt generator, at a cost of about \$38,000. With more energy-efficient equipment online, the village expects it could get by with a 100 kilowatt generator that would cost about \$30,000.

Those subdivision plans have died on the drawing board, and along with them the intention to have the developer pay for the equipment.

“It looks very doubtful that development is going to happen now,” Neumann said.

“We have been trying to get money for a generator in the budget for years, but there is no time like the present with the July 23 outage still fresh in everyone’s minds.”

The outage caused other major headaches throughout the community.

Temporary stop signs had to be posted at the intersection of Highway 57 and Highway H, because the traffic signals were out.

Municipal vehicles stored in the Department of Public Works garage were inaccessible, because the large overhead door couldn’t be raised without power.

Fire department personnel were concerned that there wouldn’t be sufficient water pumped through the village fire hydrants in the event of a fire during the outage.

The fire department’s backup generator also failed during the outage, temporarily keeping all emergency equipment in the fire station. The generator was fixed later that morning.

Although serious incidents were avoided, Village President Chuck Lapicola said the outage proved the village needs to make a backup generator a priority.

“What if a tornado rolls through and we are out of power for a week or two? I can remember losing power for three days in (Michigan’s) Upper Peninsula, and it was pretty tough times,” Lapicola said.

Long-time village residents said a 1976 ice storm left sections of the community without electricity for more than a week.

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Even though the village budget will be extremely lean in the coming years, Lapicola said funding could probably be found for a generator.

One financial source, he said, could be money deferred from the engineering of Fredonia Avenue, since the road project has been pushed back.