To: New York State Assemblyman David Buchwald  
New York State Senator Peter Harckham  

From: New Castle Town Board  

Date: August 19, 2020  
Re: Questions for Joint Assembly-Senate Hearing on Tropical Storm Isaias  

We understand that on Thursday, August 20, 2020, the New York State Legislature will hold a joint Assembly-Senate hearing on the failures of utilities such as ConEd, Altice, and Verizon to adequately prepare and respond to Tropical Storm Isaias. In advance of the hearing, the New Castle Town Board has prepared a list of potential questions that you might consider asking the utilities.

We appreciate that there will be opportunities to review the storm response further in the days and weeks to come, and to discuss with you and with other municipalities our observations and ideas. Please consider this a preliminary list. It is only the beginning of our advocacy on behalf of this community, and we are grateful for your partnership as we seek radical improvements.

Pre-Storm Preparation

1. Can Con Ed review a timeline of their storm response deployment? When did you determine how many additional staff and mutual aid crews to request and when they should arrive in the county? How do you determine the number of incremental crews you need to activate and/or request? Do you look at historical data from previous storms? Same question for Altice & Verizon.

2. Before a major storm event, can all utility companies schedule conference calls with the municipalities 48 hours prior to review their action plans? Con Edison has such a call; the other companies do not.

3. Con Edison seemed to prepare for the “best case” weather scenario, as opposed to the “worst case” scenario. Assemblyman David Buchwald was particularly vocal in challenging the Con Edison meteorologist in advance of the storm and questioning why the company was ignoring predictions that the storm would be stronger than they were predicting. Shouldn’t Con Edison hope for the best and prepare for the worst? Is pre-storm preparation purely profit-driven decision making (a rhetorical question)?
Post-Storm and Restoration

1. The goal has always been to restore power asap for our residents. Why then is it protocol to complete all cut and clear activities before restoring power? Why couldn't there be a “buddy” crew that restores power after the cut and clear crew has completed a neighborhood? The time lag is inefficient and does not meet the main goal of restoring power asap.

2. How does Con Edison determine the number of crews dispatched to each area? Can this information be provided on a daily basis by municipality?

3. Can Con Edison implement better systems to more accurately inform the town on a real-time basis as to where crews are and the restoration timeline for each crew? Can you enable GPS in Con Edison trucks and display crews’ locations on the municipal dashboard?

4. What criteria does Con Edison use to identify municipal liaisons and what is the relationship between the muni liaison and Con Edison operations? During this event our liaison revealed that he did not have access to information about restoration crews/activity, only cut-and-clear crews. He was unable to provide us with any updates on where restoration activity was taking place, or even how many restoration crews were in town. It was only when we began bypassing our municipal liaison and escalating issues directly to Operations (Jane Solnick and Shakira Wilson) that we had any insight as to restoration activity.

Mutual Aid and Staffing

1. If Con Edison underestimated the number of crews they needed, when & how did you deploy additional crews (mutual aid)? Where do the additional crews come from? Same question for Altice & Verizon.

2. In October 2018, Con Edison announced that they were developing retainer agreements for regional contractors to improving access to resources to restore power during extended outages. Were these contracts in place prior to the storm event? Did Con Edison leverage these retainer contracts? If yes, why was the response time still so terrible?

Communications

1. In 2018, the Town of New Castle recommended that Con Edison provide a daily “press release” or “fact sheet” from Con Edison with information that the municipalities could share with residents (e.g., number of repairs, transformers damaged and replaced, poles damaged and replaced, etc.). Why is Con Edison unable to create press release-style updates to share with municipalities and residents? Why is Con Edison outsourcing its customer service to under-resourced municipalities?

2. After Riley and Quinn, municipalities were told that Con Edison’s technology systems were enhanced to be able to provide residents with a “real time” estimated time of restoration (ETR) update. However, residents experienced all of the same ETR problems that we did in 2018: inaccurate ETRs, missed ETRs, updated ETRs with no further explanation, etc. What changes were actually made to the system that provides the ETRs, and why were the ETRs still wildly inaccurate?
3000+ New Castle residents received an **erroneous text message** on Friday night claiming that power would be restored by 11PM. In reality, fewer than 300 residents should have received the message. Despite quick action by the Town and our elected officials to notify Con Ed of its error, Con Ed was unable to correct its error and to update the ETRs. Con Ed was also unable to text an apology because it was not one of the canned messages allowed by the texting technology. Can you explain how such an error occurs, what steps you will take to make sure this never happens again, and can you commit to updating your text messaging technology to enable custom messages?

4. We understand the need for “**emergency interruptions**” during which some residents will lose power temporarily in order to perform overhead work that will restore power to others in the community. However, why can’t Con Ed communicate that in advance so that residents are not “surprised” to lose power, and so that they can plan appropriately?

5. As we have expressed previously, the Town of New Castle remains troubled and frustrated that residents were **falsely** told that the town DPW needed to clear trees (in wires) before Con Ed could perform its work. Once again, our DPW was ready to work and waiting on Con Ed to arrive. Why does Con Ed continue to push blame onto the towns? Why can’t Con Ed change this narrative, starting with the “wire watchers” who are often the ones making these claims?

**Operations and Storm Hardening**

1. How often does Con Ed **audit its power lines' vulnerabilities**? In other words, how often do the Con Ed crews trim/cut back/assess if there are dead trees in the vicinity of their power lines? How often are poles, transformers, and lines inspected?

2. Can Con Ed, Altice, and Verizon commit to **meeting with municipalities on a regular basis** (biannually) to review their maintenance and storm-hardening programs?

3. In 2018 Con Ed announced the launch of a $2 mil **tree-trimming pilot program** in Cortlandt in which Con Ed-contracted arborists would working with municipal staff and property owners to identify dangerous trees on customers’ properties for removal. What is the status of that program? How much was spent on it? Can this be rapidly brought to scale across municipalities, particularly in Northern Westchester, and, if not, would Con Ed consider providing direct funding to municipalities to be able to conduct these activities using their DPWs?

4. Con Ed completed the installation of **Smart Meters** in December 2019, which we were told would put an end to “fake news” texts, i.e., “We believe your power has been restored, Text Yes to confirm.” We were also told that Smart Meters would obviate the need for reporting outages, and re-reporting outages due to “lost” tickets. What happened?

5. In October 2018, Con Ed announced that they were investing **$100 mil over a 4-year period to improve its overhead system**. This includes replacing poles, creating more “breakaway” power lines, and adding stronger “steel messenger” cables. Please provide an update on these activities – How much was spent? What work was completed? Where did this work occur (note: to our knowledge it did not happen in New Castle)?
6. In the aftermath of Riley and Quinn, we were told that Con Edison purchased **100 trucks that would be “mothballed” and ready for out-of-town crews** to use when they arrive. This recommendation was made by former County Legislator Mike Kaplowitz. Did Con Edison use these trucks to respond to this storm?

7. While we appreciate that the cost is overwhelming ($1 mil/mi), can Con Edison share a **cost/benefit analysis of whether burying power lines now would save money** in the future by reducing the cost of responding to storms?

**Altice (Optimum)**

1. Why did it take Altice a week to address the outages? The storm event was on 8/4. **Altice didn't start restoring service until a week later** and only started conducting calls with the municipalities on 8/10. What was going on during that week?

2. Will Altice and Version install **back-up generators** on cell towers?

**Verizon**

1. When did Verizon begin **surveying the storm damage** in the community and working on restoration activities? A Verizon wire was laying across 4 lanes of Rt. 100 at the entrance to the Taconic State Parkway for nearly a week – how is that even possible? When did you first set foot in New Castle?

As we continue to debrief on the storm response and engage our community in providing feedback, we anticipate unearthing more feedback and many recommendations. We appreciate this opportunity to provide you with an initial set of questions, and look forward to working together on improving service for residents in the Town of New Castle.

Cc: Hon. George Latimer, Westchester County Executive
Hon. Vedat Gashi, Westchester County Legislator
Jill Shapiro, New Castle Town Administrator
Chief James Carroll, New Castle Police Department
Bart Carey, Assistant Commissioner, New Castle Department of Public Works