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FEATURED

Texas Senators grill CenterPoint CEO over Beryl failures, county judge speaks at special committee hearing

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Why did millions lose power and why did it take two weeks to fully restore power in the Houston area?

These are questions Texas lawmakers hammered CenterPoint's CEO with at a special senate committee meeting held Monday in Austin.

Members of the committee expressed frustration about the failures CenterPoint made during Hurricane Beryl, including lack of communication, lack of seriousness in preparation, malfunction of their outage

Beryl, including lack of communication, lack of seriousness in preparation, malfunction of their outage map, disorganized operations and lack of vegetation management.

“We’ve had many hurricanes hit the coastal area,” Senator Juan Hinojosa (D-10) said. “By now our energy companies could have learned lessons and best practices – we can’t continue to make the same mistakes from the past. Maybe we need to look at some of the changes or ways the state regulates some of these companies that seem unable to perform very basic responsibilities in taking care of our public.”

Senator Brandon Creighton (D-4) said the names of four victims to Beryl aloud to the galley, stating those constituents in his district deserve answers.

“This is the tenth named storm since Hurricane Harvey,” he said. “We spent countless time working on storm resiliency all under the guise of preparation – how did we get to this point?”

State senators listened to testimony from Texas Division of Emergency Management Director Nim Kidd and Public Utility Commission Thomas Gleeson who each explained their processes in preparation to Beryl weeks in advance.

Senator Paul Bettencourt (D-7) didn’t hold back when confronting CenterPoint’s CEO Jason Wells.

“Your communications failures exasperated this and poured gasoline on the problem for millions of people who wanted to understand a simple question that we take for granted in this life – are the lights on, when are they going to come on and are they going to stay on?” Bettencourt said. “I think we have a very large problem to deal with that the rate payers are paying for. I get madder and madder each time I read about what could have been done. It makes my blood boil we’re having to have a hearing about a bunch of people who did their job right – but the biggest multibillion dollar corporation – we’re having to tell you how to do your job.”

Bettencourt said many opportunities were missed years ago to fix these problems and pointed out changes in infrastructure and technology to fix outage maps have been available since 2008

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The senator also pointed out the high turnover rate at CenterPoint, noting Wells is the third CEO in the last three years and asked why others have stepped down since Beryl.

“I take personal accountability for not meeting our customers’ expectations during Hurricane Beryl,” he said. “It’s my job as CEO to make sure we have the right team in the right roles.”

Wells went on to explain steps the company is taking in commitment to accepting responsibility including hiring a chief communications officer, bringing on a senior experienced emergency preparedness leader and change in leadership of electric operations.

“It’s inexcusable our site wasn’t ready for customers during Beryl,” Wells said. “The online traffic overwhelmed our servers and immediately we conducted a root cause analysis.”

Wells said the company launched a project to move the outage tracker to the cloud – but those projects take about three months to connect.

Nearly three million people lost power in the Houston area after Beryl made landfall as a category one storm. Senators said dozens of people died from heat complications from losing power – including one in Matagorda County.

Though lawmakers called for Wells resignation, Wells said he believes leaving his role – after just seven months – would slow the company’s resiliency efforts.

“If I resign today, we lose momentum on the things that are going to have the best possible impact for the Greater Houston region,” he said.

Wells said CenterPoint has a list of 40 commitments outlined to ensure this doesn’t happen again. The company also plans to double the size of vegetation management crews to tackle the primary cause of outages – trees falling on lines.

Matagorda County Judge Bobby Seiferman attended the 10-hour hearing, explaining the counties difficulties during and post Beryl

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“Matagorda County is still in recovery,” he said. “We got clobbered just like all the constituents and groups we’ve heard from today. It’s been a long time since we’ve taken a direct hit, but a direct hit we took.”

Seiferman said he’s proud of the efforts the Matagorda County Emergency Operations Center took in ordering voluntary evacuations and getting vacationers out before the storm hit, but noted loss of communications was frightening.

“We take that for granted,” he said. “Cell phones, Wi-Fi and landlines – we had nothing – nothing. It was frightening. The entire county’s power was knocked out and we had to improvise. Our ham radio operators saved us. Folks, I am one of two judges with a nuclear power plant in their county in this state – that cannot happen.”

Seiferman said he was encouraged by everything he heard at the hearing and feels confident in state lawmakers moving forward.

“I think they’ll tackle serious endeavors regarding communications and how they grapple with power continuing and capable infrastructure,” he said. “We had really good communication with AEP and Jackson Electric and the vast majority of homes were powered up after four days. They had both made really big strides that Tuesday and Wednesday and they had 100 plus poles to replace in Sargent alone.”

Seiferman said he and the local emergency operations team are going to look into backup communications so local officials, law enforcement and first responders won’t be in the dark again during disaster.

“We’re going to be ready next time, so we don’t wait around for a carrier to come down here to set up something,” he said. “We’re going to have our communications nailed down. We’re definitely going to follow through on it so we’re not out in the parking lot sending smoke signals.”