

Outlook on Halton Hills

Downed tower causes 8-hour blackout

By DONNA KELL
Herald Staff

The greater portion of Halton Hills was caught in the grasp of a widespread blackout that lasted for eight hours Thursday morning.

The source of the blackout, which affected approximately 87,000 homes and businesses, was a 150-foot hydro transmission tower that came crashing to the ground emitting 230,000 volts of live power at 4:38 a.m. Hydro officials believe the incident was the result of vandalism.

Georgetown, rural Acton, Brampton and Mississauga were without power, including traffic lights until 1 p.m. when crew members rerouted electrical current from the Erin Mills Parkway-Highway 403 tower to local generating stations.

"It involves a whole lot of juggling to reroute power," said Ontario Hydro spokesman Mary-Jane Jaffray. "We've rerouted the power and we're going to install a new tower by Sunday."

Hydro officials say no one was injured during the several minutes live cables lay strewn across Erin Mills Parkway in Mississauga, but a woman driving a courier truck impacted with the circuit, Peel Regional Police say.

The woman, who remained in her truck after hitting the wires, was unharmed.

"It's unbelievable that somebody didn't get hurt," said Milton Ontario Hydro representative Don Nelson. He added that the wire carrying the current was on the road for several minutes. Officials pulled the plug on the area's electrical power as soon as the accident was noticed.

Ms. Jaffray said an accident of this proportion would be picked up at the area's central stations.

The transformer station carrying the 230,000 volts runs from Richview Transformer Station near Lester B. Pearson International Airport to the Trafalgar Transformer Station in Oakville. Ms. Jaffray said anything involving Richview would have a major impact on a large population.

Gas pumps, traffic lights, and street lights were off in Georgetown streets causing some people to abandon their cars at the road sides.

Ontario Hydro suggests the cause of the tower collapse is "vandalism. Someone had removed the nuts from the front of the tower," said Ms. Jaffray.

"The person who did it endangered the public's safety."

She added that a strong, large person with some sort of tools to remove the nuts was responsible for making the structure unsafe. "A child or a small woman couldn't have done this," she said.

Peel Regional Police and Ontario Hydro officials are investigating the incident.

Downtown Acton, which is fed from a transformer station in Guelph, was unaffected by the blackout, according to local hydro officials.



Power was off for over eight hours after a hydro transmission tower came crashing across an off-ramp along Hwy. 403. Officials suspect vandalism as the cause for the incident which led to traffic problems and loss

of revenue for businesses which had to close down during the power outage. Fortunately, there was no one hurt in the incident.

Grocers scramble to save perishables

By BRIAN MacLEOD
Herald Staff

One of the longest power outages in Halton Hills in years cost businesses in town thousands of dollars Thursday, mostly in lost revenue.

"It's horrendous," said Miracle Food Mart manager Tim Martin of the eight-hour blackout.

The power shortage disturbed the Guelph Street store's computer system rendering cash registers inoperable, said Mr. Martin. Cashiers expected to be using hand calculators well into the evening, he said.

Mr. Martin estimated he lost about \$1,000 in perishable goods - mainly red meat.

Store employees carted in 1,500 pounds of dry ice to help keep the frozen goods and meats cold, but milk and eggs may have lost a few days off their expiry date and some red meats will end up in the gar-

bage, said Mr. Martin. The store remained open during the blackout as 30 to 40 customers shopped in the dark on a morning in which more than 200 customers usually pour through the checkouts.

Any meat which became discolored due to temperatures which got as high as 80 degrees Fahrenheit, will be thrown out, said Mr. Martin.

The effect was not as dramatic across the street at Loblaws supermarket where about 200 pounds of dry ice helped to keep things cool, said store manager Ron McEachern.

Loblaws locked up, turning the "whole store into a refrigerator," he said.

The dry ice was placed strategically over red meats and frozen goods while the store itself kept relatively cool, he said.

The store remained closed until shortly after 1 p.m. when power was

restored.

At the new Knechtel's Georgetown Food Market in Moore Park Plaza, an innovative approach came to mind.

"We emptied our counters and put it in the back room and opened the back two doors," said store owner Bob Creasy.

The perishable goods survived the eight-hour power outage through the use of nature's refrigerator, he said.

Knechtel's lost the memory on its meat scale after the power outage, but it also lost between \$3,000 and \$4,000 in business - a lot for a smaller store, said Mr. Creasy.

At Canadian Tire on Guelph Street the loss of customers during the Christmas rush "was devastating for us," said Canadian Tire owner Murray Lawton.

The doors remained closed at Canadian Tire until 2:30, when the memory to the computer run cash boxes could be restored.

At 4:30 p.m., Canadian Tire still had only three of the five checkouts in operation, said Mr. Lawton.

One person who waited outside

Canadian Tire during the morning power shortage told Mr. Lawton that upwards of 50 customers came and left in just one half-hour period.

Mr. Lawton said the power outage was the worst local businesses have experienced in the 18 years he has been in Georgetown.

Downtown Georgetown Business Improvement Area Co-ordinator Margaret Vint said many of the businesses closed down during the shortage.

But Golden Fish and Chips on Main Street did a booming business for coffee on their natural gas stove, she said.

In a different twist, Whimsey's store owner Sandi O'Connor said the blackout likely didn't cost her store any money because "it's been crazy around here" since power returned.

Although Whimsey's remained closed because of lack of heat and light, more people visited the Main Street store than expected in the afternoon, said Ms. O'Connor.

In fact, there were far more people shopping in the downtown area than normal, she said.



What appears to have been a senseless act of vandalism could have had dire consequences if a hydro transmission tower had fallen during a busy time of the day for Hwy. 403. As it was the driver of this courier

truck was the only one who came close to coming in contact with the high-voltage lines, and she managed to escape the danger zone without injury.

Vandalism suspected in tower accident

Ontario Hydro suspects vandalism in the transmission tower accident Thursday that cut off power to Georgetown, rural Acton, Brampton and Mississauga, affecting 87,000 homes and businesses.

Hydro spokesman Ross Fitchett said the hydro commission is unsure of when the nuts on the 150-foot tower's base were loosened and removed or who the vandal was. But he added the pressure on the bolts plus a strong gust of wind knocked the giant tower over, sprawling it across the off-ramp of westbound Highway 403.

"To keep the base of the tower in place, there are eight nuts altogether. All of them were taken off and taken away," he said.

Hydro officials and Peel Regional Police failed to find the nuts at the accident site.

The base of the transmission tower has four concrete footings which contain five eight-inch bolts, said Mr. Fitchett. The bolts held the base of the tower in place, but were useless without the nuts.

Mr. Fitchett said it would take "considerable equipment" to remove the nuts from the tower which is a "corner" or "angle" tower. The nuts could have been removed several days ago, and the tower could have fallen at another time, he said.

Peel Regional Police and Ontario Hydro officials continue to investigate the incident.