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Can our electricity system cope with climate change?

Watching streets fill with water and the lights blink out across the city, caused Ontario's Clean Air Alliance to ask if we really are prepared for the coming climate storm.

More than 170,000 Toronto and Mississauga residents lost power after last Monday night's torrential downpour. This was largely a result of the province's continued reliance on a highly centralized electricity system that, for example, routes power from distant nuclear stations into Toronto via just two major connection points. If one of these points goes down – such as the damaged Manby Transformer Station in the city's west end last week – big areas of the city can quickly find themselves sitting in the dark.

Thanks to climate change, storms are going to get stronger and more frequent. We could build dykes around our transformer stations, or we could adopt a smarter, more decentralized approach to electricity production and

distribution. More rooftop solar (pv and thermal), more geothermal (to curb the power demand from air conditioning), more combined heat and power, especially in condos, hospitals and office towers so that elevators, lights and incubators continue to operate when the grid goes down.

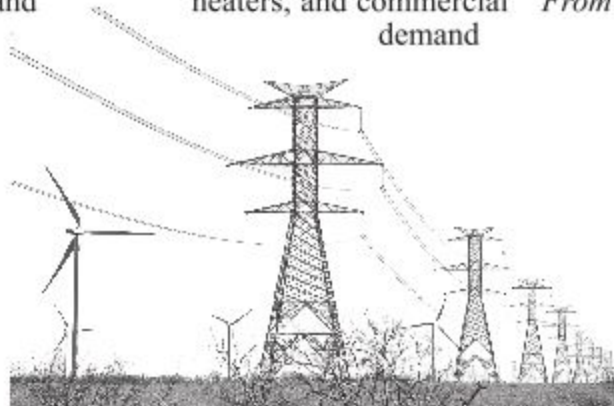
By boosting the city's ability to generate its own power, we become much less dependent on tenuous long-distance transmission lines and a tiny handful of transformer stations. Toronto can meet just 13 percent of its peak day electricity needs from local sources while New York City is required to meet 80 percent of its power needs from local sources. Toronto can and must do better.

The second thing we need to do is increase our ability to reduce demand in critical periods. On Tuesday, Toronto Hydro used both the peaksaver program, which dials back demand from air conditioners, pool pumps and water heaters, and commercial demand

reduction measures to reduce the pressure on an over-extended system. These measures helped keep the lights on for at least some Torontonians, but we could do a lot better: peaksaver participation rates remain frankly pathetic seven years after the program was introduced, and commercial demand reduction still has lots of untapped potential. If we had stronger demand reduction programs, we wouldn't have to worry about huge spikes in demand on hot summer days and we would be better prepared for emergency situations as well. We could also avoid the high cost of a new gas pipeline.

Last Monday was an important lesson about the fragility of our current centralized electricity system. We can continue to try to patch up the existing system or we can start to address its big underlying flaws. With severe storm warnings becoming a near weekly occurrence, we better get going on the latter.

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