2006 storm aftermath: A look back

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It's been about a month since the windstorm that brought the Seattle area to a standstill. Puget Sound Energy has posted a recap of the storm, including what I consider to be a wonderful euphemism:

> We thank those customers who called to update us with valuable outage status information.

Translation: "We would like to acknowledge all the people who called in to complain." Not surprisingly, the storm got a lot of coverage in the local paper. Conspiracy theorists will be woefully dissatisfied with this explanation of how the utility companies decide which lines to repair first. I heard in a radio story that another factor is that a small outage may get fixed out of priority order if a repair crew happens to be nearby (presumably working on a higher priority repair) and the problem can be fixed quickly. It's a fascinating optimization problem, deciding how to deploy limited resources most efficiently, and a problem I am glad it's not my job to solve. Many local governments are looking at low-tech solutions to communications problems, since the power outage highlighted our dependence on electronic communications. One of my friends told me about a local government official who appeared on the radio to announce the opening of shelters for people who were out of power and needed a place to stay. When the local official said, "A list of all the locations can be found on our web site," the show host replied, "Um, people without electricity can't check the web site." A different friend told me about a caller to a radio talk show from one of the outlying areas who complained about the glacial pace at which municipal services were being restored. The host opined, "Yeah, well, that's what happens when you live in a rural area, I guess."

The caller answered, "Well, I used to live in Seattle, but I left because the taxes were too high."

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