

Area companies powering recovery from Sandy

More than 120 workers are downstate helping out the hard-hit region

By **ANDREA DECKERT**

Two area firms have been involved with keeping the lights on and restoring power to parts of downstate since superstorm Sandy ripped through the area, leaving more than 8.5 million homes and businesses in the dark.

Rochester-based Energy Concepts Engineering P.C., which does business as Energy Concepts, and O'Connell Electric Co. Inc. of Victor, Ontario County, have been involved with power restoration in the areas hit hardest by the storm.

The storm slammed the Northeast coast early last week, killing at least 106 people and causing damage estimated at more than \$20 billion.

O'Connell Electric has more than 120 workers and 68 pieces of equipment and vehicles providing disaster response services to the East Coast. That includes 51 linemen, 60 electricians and 20 bucket trucks. The firm employs roughly 500 people.

Areas where O'Connell people are working include Long Island for National Grid PLC and Brewster, Putnam County, for Iberdrola USA Inc. Their work includes powerline restoration, residential service restoration and damage assessment.

The company also did work in Liberty, Sullivan County, said Bruce Vassallo, O'Connell's general manager for the service division. The work there was wrapping up at midweek, and the crews there would go next to Putnam County, which suffered major damage from the storm, he added.

O'Connell is focusing on the immediate, smaller jobs that will put those without power back online, but leaders said it would take more time to get some of the smaller areas up and running.

The troubling part, they said, is the widespread damage caused by the storm, which



Photo courtesy of O'Connell Electric

Crews from O'Connell Electric were sent downstate before the storm to be ready for recovery work.

spans the Northeast. Power outages in areas that would normally take a day or two to restore are taking a week because resources have been spread so thinly.

O'Connell CEO Victor Salerno said the company is on the emergency call response team for its clients and they asked for crews to be put in place before the storm hit, so the workers could immediately get to work in the aftermath.

"They knew pretty quickly it was going to be really bad," Salerno said.

The firm estimates the jobs will last close to three weeks.

Michael Parkes, O'Connell's power group manager, said some of his crews could wrap up next week but others may stay longer, depending on the impact of this week's expected nor'easter.

O'Connell has hired additional workers to help with the efforts. With crews working upwards of 17 hours a day, O'Connell has seen a rise in its payroll expenses. Last week, the business had a payroll of roughly \$1.4 million, twice as much as usual, Salerno said.

While the work downstate requires that

local projects be put on the back burner, it is something that must be done, Salerno said.

"We know the importance of this, and our people down there are putting their hearts and souls into the work," he said.

Energy Concepts also has been involved with power restoration.

The company's power plant at a co-op residential building in Manhattan kept the power on for more than four days in the aftermath of Sandy. The power plant was designed as a cogeneration plant to provide economic savings to the building, but it also served as backup power.

Joe Weinschreider, Energy Concepts' senior engineer and one of the company's founders, designed the 400-kilowatt cogeneration system for the building at 11 Fifth Ave. in 2009 with the intent to provide the entire building with power during a blackout.

He estimates there are 720 regular tenants in the building, and during the storm, the number of people in the building rose to roughly 1,500. People came from other parts of Manhattan, along with Brooklyn,

Queens and Westchester, Weinschreider said.

“The fact that the 20-story building had heat, electricity and—most important—water was huge,” he said. “Other nearby buildings ran out of water, and without pumps to deliver it up the high-rises, tenants could not even use bathrooms.”

Founded in 1999, Energy Concepts spe-

cializes in cogeneration and on-site power and has designed more than 75 cogeneration plants. The firm has plants at the Greater Rochester International Airport and several school buildings in Greece, and most recently it completed a 2.2-megawatt cogeneration plant for St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Utica.

Energy Concepts employs 16 workers—

including 13 in Rochester—and has additional offices in New York City and New Jersey.

“It’s always good to help our clients save money and energy, but when our systems can help during catastrophic events, that makes it even better,” Weinschreider said.

adeckert@rbj.net / 585-546-8303