

Power in the Park: Neighborhood Event Connects Constituents to Energy Savings

By Rosanne Skirble - August 16, 2021



Del. Lorig Charkoudian (D-Montgomery) organized Power in the Park, a block party at New Hampshire Estates in Silver Spring to address the high cost of energy. Photo by Rosanne Skirble.

On a hot and humid evening earlier this month, Del. Lorig Charkoudian (D-Montgomery) was able to take advantage of a break in the stormy weather. With music blaring and a spread of free food, she kicked off “Power in the Park,” a block party at New Hampshire Estates Neighborhood Park, an oasis of green in an otherwise urban landscape in Silver Spring.

Charkoudian hosted the gathering to address the high cost of energy, which is an especially challenging problem for her constituents in the largely immigrant and African American neighborhood — and for poor residents across the state.

Elected to the House of Delegates in 2018, Charkoudian came to Annapolis with a strong environmental agenda and commitment to social justice.

In the 2021 session, 12 of her bills became law, including measures to require that climate change be considered when state regulators decide how electricity is generated, a bill to grow the use of geothermal energy, and a bill to institute a “community choice energy” program in Montgomery County.

“I’m glad you’re here. I’m your state delegate,” she told the largely Spanish-speaking crowd of 100-plus who came from the nearby Long Branch, Takoma Park and White Oak communities and listened to her remarks on special headsets that provided translation.

Charkoudian said she wants to connect them with sources to reduce their power bills.

“We can take all of these programs that we’ve been building at the state level through state law and at the county level through county programs, and make sure that everybody in our community knows about that,” she said.

Information and energy bling

One-by-one, partners from state and local agencies took their turn at the mic, joined by speakers from trusted advocates in the immigrant community: CASA, CHEER, IMPACT Silver Spring and the Audubon Naturalist Society. Families then were free to roam, watching their kids play games or fanning out among the information tables, enticed by energy bling like recycled bags, glow sticks and LED light bulbs.



A neighbor signed up for information about Neighborhood Sun at the Power in the Park block party. Photo by Rosanne Skirble.

Larissa Johnson saw the event as an opportunity to educate. She handed out home comfort kits with safety plug covers, door and window caulking, and shrink film that can be placed on windows provided by Montgomery County’s Energy Connection program.

Johnson, who is resident energy program manager for Montgomery County’s Department of Environmental Protection, explained to passersby that plugging leaks with these simple fixes can lower energy bills.

“Heating and cooling accounts for about 45% of your electricity bill. Check your thermostat, keeping it at 78 in the summer and 68 in the winter, make sure your refrigerator is running optimally, and make sure that you’re switching to LED light bulbs,” she told Ana Montana, who lives with her mother and two daughters in a family-owned home close to the park.

“We have high electric bills and a lot of expenses,” Montana said, a comment echoed by Jamie Umanzor, who brought three of her five children for a fun night out — and to find out how to cut costs.

“My light bill was \$400. I want to apply for help,” Umanzor said.

Energy assistance for renters and homeowners

Kate Natafgi with the Maryland Office of Home Energy Programs encouraged residents she spoke with to apply for financial help before there’s a crisis.

Natafgi said it is important to gain trust with residents who may be wary of filling out paper forms, especially undocumented immigrants.

That she, herself is a Spanish-speaking immigrant makes it easier to get across her message.

“We just try to talk to the families and let them know that everything is confidential, that we understand their situation, and that we’re here to help,” Natafgi said.

“We want to put as much information as possible in the moment in people’s hands,” she said as Hilda Beatriz Dillarez Lopez signed her name on clipboard and took a self-addressed stamped envelope with application forms.

Lopez, who fled gang violence in Guatemala, leaving two children behind, lives in an apartment a few blocks away with her husband and 8-year-old son.

“We’ve got bills that are very expensive, and possibly I’ll find help with these programs,” she said.

Another neighbor standing beside Lopez said her electric bills are high too, forcing her to make decisions between paying the utilities and other basic family needs.

Brandi Nieland is the director of consumer assistance in the Office of People’s Counsel, an independent state agency that handles complaints against utility companies: “Maybe you feel like you’ve been overcharged on your bill, and you don’t understand it. Or a lot of people don’t think their meter is running right, or they struggle with payments,” she said.

Her agency also partners with community rescue agencies to reach residents in need.

Events like Power in the Park also build trust, she said.

Free home energy assessments

Pepco, the Washington, D.C.-area public utility that supplies electricity to D.C. and surrounding Maryland communities, was also on hand at the event.

Nate Gillespie, the senior manager for customer solutions appeared with an all-electric 2021 Ford Mustang Mach-E, to highlight an initiative with BGE and Delmarva Power to install 1,000 electric vehicle chargers on public property.

His team of experts discussed Pepco’s EmPower Maryland, a power charge that appears on all state utility bill that funds services that help consumers reduce energy consumption and save money.

“There’s a whole suite of programs,” he said, including a no-cost energy audit that can quickly identify problems, and provide on-the-spot solutions by supplying LED lights, power strips, water saving devices, and hot water wraps for pipes.

After the event Charkoudian was amazed with the turnout and excitement.

“We set out to build community, get to know neighbors, and have fun,” she said. “I learned that we can make energy efficiency, and clean energy a wildly exciting event in a park on a summer night. Who knew?!”

Rosanne Skirble is a freelance writer in Silver Spring.



A representative from Pepco told residents about ways to lower electric bills, including installing energy-efficient light bulbs, at the Power in the Park event. Photo by Rosanne Skirble.

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