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After a Death, Con Ed Tests Show High-Voltage Dangers Lurking

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Correction Appended

It's a map of hidden danger.

Three weeks after Jodie S. Lane was killed by an electrified metal plate while walking her dogs in the East Village, Consolidated Edison as of yesterday had found more than 280 service-box lids, manhole covers and lampposts around the five boroughs and Westchester County with stray current passing through them. The amount of voltage in each, the utility said, ranged from the single digits - which would produce a mild shock - to 140 at a lamppost in Bayside, Queens, which could be fatal.

The electrified spots were discovered during emergency inspections prompted by Ms. Lane's death. Con Ed said that all the trouble spots were repaired as soon as they were discovered, and marked with red spray paint. The inspections are expected to be completed by the end of the month, a Con Ed spokesman, Chris Olert, said. In all, 550,000 sites will be checked.

A map created by The New York Times shows that the so-called hot spots were found in fairly equal numbers around Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx, with only one on Staten Island and two in Westchester. It also shows that potentially deadly steel service-box lids, manhole covers and lampposts existed for unknown lengths of time at some of the city's busiest intersections, just inches from thousands of daily passers-by.



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Random visits late Wednesday to several lampposts on Con Ed's list revealed that at least two of them - both at 46th Street and Queens Boulevard in Sunnyside, Queens - still had electrical current passing through them. The stray-voltage device used by The Times was the same pen-shaped tool used by Con Ed, and while it does not measure the exact voltage, it gives off a stronger red light if a high amount of stray electricity is found. At the two Queens Boulevard sites, 10 feet apart, the device became bright red when held several inches away from the lampposts.

One of the lampposts stands in a busy area in front of the entrance to a Food Dynasty store, where bikes were locked up and children were lounging. At the adjacent bus stop, Jose Ontario, 32, of Jackson Heights, said he was glad that it was his habit to stay in the bus shelter rather than lean on that pole.

On the base of the other charged lamp, in a hole that should have been covered by a metal panel, was a mix of candy wrappers, empty cans, slush and a tangle of taped wires. Both lampposts were immediately brought to the attention of Con Edison. Experts said the entire casing of a lamppost could be electrified when the insulation around the wires carrying current to the light became corroded as and touched the casing.

Mr. Olert said that the utility corrected stray voltage problems at that location six days ago and that he was not sure why there might be stray voltage still flowing. He said that Con Ed was working with the city to correct the problem. The Department of Transportation said last night that the lampposts on the Con Ed list were across the street from those checked by The Times, and that repair crews were on the scene.

Councilman John C. Liu, chairman of the City Council's Transportation Committee, which is to hold a public hearing Thursday on Con Ed's safety and maintenance record, said, "That it takes Con Ed repeated tries to get these problems solved makes it obvious that the city's aging electrical infrastructure is in dire need of attention."

Officials with the Fire Department and Con Ed said they were unaware of any injuries in connection with the lampposts cited on the Con Ed list. But William M. Mazer, a retired professor of electrical engineering at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, said the faulty lampposts presented a very real danger of shock to passers-by on wet sidewalks.

Sally Haddock, a veterinarian at St. Mark's Veterinary Hospital, said that many clients had told of dogs being shocked by electrified lampposts. Dogs are especially vulnerable, she said, because their paws are exposed, whereas people are protected by their shoes, which ground them.

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The trouble spots listed by the utility were the result of two surveys, one for lampposts and one for service-box and manhole covers.

Though Con Ed was initially reluctant to release a list, the Department of Transportation, which shares responsibility for streetlights, provided a lamppost list on Wednesday. Con Ed followed yesterday with a list of manhole and service-box covers. The lamppost list was up to date as of Tuesday, the manhole and service box list as of yesterday.

The highest voltage found was 140 at a lamppost at 53rd Avenue and Oceania Street in Bayside, Queens. A block from Times Square, on 43rd Street off Eighth Avenue - among the city's busiest areas - Con Ed found and corrected a street lamp with 110 stray volts. Any voltage above 50 can be fatal.

One electrified lamppost was found on Staten Island, and no faulty manhole or service-box covers.

Manhattan had 53 electrified manholes and service-box covers, and 30 charged lampposts. The Bronx had 6 electrified manhole and service-box covers and 25 charged lampposts. In Brooklyn, 25 manhole and service-box locations and 38 streetlights were cited, and in Queens, 34 faulty lampposts and 24 manholes and service boxes. For Westchester County, Con Ed said, there were only 2 electrified service-box and manhole covers found and no faulty lampposts. (Locations for all the services boxes, lampposts and manhole covers can be found at nytimes.com/metro.)

Jim Long, a spokesman for the New York City Fire Department, said that manhole problems ranged from simple smoke seepage to explosions shooting manhole covers several stories into the air. He said that most years, manhole problems numbered fewer than 2,500. In 2003, there were more than 4,500.

Correction Feb. 10, 2004, Tuesday

An article on Friday about Consolidated Edison's repair of electrified service-box lids, manhole covers and lampposts misstated the way shoes protect people from shocks. They insulate; they do not act as a ground. (A grounded object conducts electricity.) A picture caption misstated a finding by The Times at a lamppost in Sunnyside, Queens. The post was conducting an electrical current, not emitting electricity.

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