

# Thousands still in the dark in Asheville post-Helene. Duke Energy has a temporary fix

BY MARY RAMSEY  
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ASHEVILLE  
Duke Energy plans to restore power to thousands in a Helene-ravaged Asheville neighborhood within days using a temporary solution to a problem that would otherwise take months to fix. Like the Biltmore Village community it serves, the Biltmore substation was ravaged by the Swannanoa River’s raging flood waters during the storm. Shredded mulch bags, plywood and a garden hose holder that raced downstream during the storm from a nearby Lowe’s are still tangled up in the substation’s lower

level. The mangled station now sits just across a partially washed-out two-lane road from the river. Fast food restaurants normally bustling with tourists visiting the nearby Biltmore Estate are washed out, too. There are mauled vehicles strewn haphazardly and a shipping container wrapped around a power transmission pole. The damage has been a “logjam” to restoring power to about 6,700 customers, primarily in Biltmore Village and south Asheville, Duke spokesman Bill Norton said. The substation’s lower level was “completely flooded out,” meaning it must be “completely rebuilt,” Norton said.

There’s also likely water damage to the substation’s upper tier. Repairs will take three to four months. “There’s no way we could keep customers waiting that long,” Norton said. To provide a faster fix, special crews drove in a 200,000-pound mobile substation across the state from Garner. It’s expected to restore power to at least some of the 6,700 as soon as the weekend. “They’re hurting, so we want to get their power on as quickly as possible,” Norton said. It’s one of multiple mobile substations going in across Western North Carolina in an effort to help the hundreds of thousands still without power

in Helene’s path. **MOBILE SUBSTATIONS PROVIDE ‘OFF-RAMP’ FOR POWER**  
On Thursday afternoon, a Duke crew worked through mud and the odor of dirty river water to dig trenches and lay new copper wiring for the Biltmore mobile substation. For some customers, “power will be back right away” once it’s online, Norton said. Others may have down power lines in their neighborhood that will also have to be addressed before power is restored. “It’s nice to be able to get a chunk like this on all at once,” Norton said. Another mobile substation is already up and

running near New Salem Road, also along the Swannanoa River. A third is planned for Hot Springs, about an hour northwest of Asheville, to power its hydroelectric dam. Substations are a critical connection for getting power to customers — like an off-ramp from the interstate into a town, Norton said. **LATEST NEWS ON WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA POWER OUTAGES**  
Duke has restored power to more than 1 million in North Carolina in the week since Helene hit, but a little more than 200,000 are still in the dark in the state’s hard-hit mountain areas, according

to Norton. With much of the rest of the state in good shape, Duke is sending everyone available west. “It allows us to collapse all the resources into the mountain region,” he said. Improving cell phone reception and internet service has made it easier for crews in the area, some of whom traveled from as far away as Canada, to communicate and work more efficiently, Norton said. Duke expects most customers to get their power back by the end of the week. But for some areas, where roads have been completely washed out, it will take more time. “If that road is gone, our poles are gone, the easement is gone. That is not a week-long restoration ... It’ll be weeks,” Norton said.

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## Ports reopen as union agrees to suspend strike

BY PETER EAVIS  
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The International Longshoremen’s Association agreed Thursday to suspend a strike that had closed down major ports on the East and Gulf coasts. The move followed an improved wage offer from port employers. The Georgia Ports Authority said its facilities would reopen Friday, and the Port of New York and New Jersey said it would dispatch mechanics Friday morning to get the terminal back to an operational status. On Thursday evening, the Port of Virginia said it would take 24 hours to fully restore operations.

The strike, which the

dockworkers union began Tuesday, had threatened to weigh on the economy five weeks before national elections. Employers, represented by the U.S. Maritime Alliance, have offered to increase wages by 62% over the course of a new six-year contract, according to a person familiar with negotiations who did not want to be identified because the talks were continuing. That increase is lower than what the union had initially asked for but much higher than the alliance’s earlier offer. In a statement, the union said that it had reached “a tentative agreement on wages” and that its 45,000 members would go back to work, with the current contract extended until Jan. 15. The

union said it was returning to the bargaining table “to negotiate all other outstanding issues.” The alliance issued a similar statement. The agreement came after the White House pressed both sides to reach a deal to end the strike, the union’s first full-scale walkout since 1977. The wage increase is a clear victory for the ILA and its combative president, Harold J. Daggett, a 78-year-old, third-generation dockworker who has led the union since 2011. President Joe Biden, when asked about the tentative deal on the tarmac at Joint Base Andrews on Thursday evening, said: “We’ve been working hard on it. With the grace of God, it’s going to hold.”

A 62% increase would raise the top longshoremen’s wage to just over \$63 per hour at the end of a new six-year contract, from today’s \$39 per hour. And at \$63 an hour, the wages of East and Gulf Coast longshoremen would slightly exceed those that will be earned by West Coast longshoremen, who belong to a different union, at the end of their contract in 2027. In the resumed talks, the issue of how much automation can occur at the ports could divide the sides. The union has also been pressing for improved retirement benefits. Another potential sticking point is the pay of longshoremen who are just starting out and don’t earn the top wage rate.

Daggett’s son, Dennis A. Daggett, a senior official at the ILA, said in an interview Tuesday on a picket line in Bayonne, New Jersey, that the union wanted to get higher wages for less experienced members. Many businesses, expecting the strike, accelerated imports through the ports before the strike. But a long strike could have led to shortages, and it was already beginning to cause congestion in supply chains. Perishable goods were particularly at risk from a strike. “I’m definitely relieved,” Daniel J. Barabino, chief operating officer at Top Banana, a fruit distributor based at the Hunts Point Produce Market in New York City, said after the announcement Thursday. “I’m happy to have this behind us.” Around three-fifths of annual container trade

goes through the East and Gulf Coast ports, including the Port of New York and New Jersey, the third-busiest in the country, and fast-growing ports in Virginia, Georgia and Texas. The West Coast ports, which remained open during the strike, were getting close to capacity and would not have been able to absorb much more cargo diverted from East Coast ports. Longshoremen, who load containers and other cargo off ships and onto trucks and trains, in general earn higher wages than workers in other blue-collar jobs. When moving large amounts of goods in and out of the country, there is no practical alternative to ports. And ports cannot operate without longshoremen, giving them a strong hand in labor negotiations.

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