

Rat creates power outage in Old Dorms

30 to 40 power outages occur every year, Sundgren says

By Courtney Stith, March 21 2016

McCormick Road Residence Areas — also known as “Old Dorms” — lost power for over an hour Thursday evening. The blackout resulted from a rat which was 14 inches in length and which burrowed into an electrical switch.

The switch in the Alderman Road power substation serves the first-year dorms and the Castle. Sathish Anabathula, associate director of power and light, said the outage affected few buildings around Grounds.

“A big rat burrowed into a 12.5kV electric switch underneath a concrete pad and made contact with energized parts,” Anabathula said in an email statement. “Very few buildings across the Grounds were affected.”

Donald Sundgren, associate vice president and chief facilities officer, said while this power disruption was short, outages occur often.

“We get what we call power outages from time to time, [but they] happen too frequently,” Sundgren said. “The vast majority are very short ... the problem is when we get a [disruption], it shuts down part of the system.”

Sundgren said 30 to 40 power outages occur each year. He also said it takes time to bring the systems back up, but dorms and other affected buildings such as health centers and research facilities have backup generators.

“[It] takes a while to get the systems back up and running, [but] dorms get backup generators,” he said. “The generators are for life safety issues.”

Although this power outage was caused by a rat, Sundgren said disruptions can generally come from other areas along the powerlines. Lines can be scraped by branches and affected by wind or a storm.

“Typically ... what happens is the lines come from Dominion Virginia Power substations go through residential areas,” Sundgren said. “Branches on lines cause problems with users along

those lines. Problems at residences and retail [along the line] can cause backfeeds to U.Va. power.”

The short power interruptions, which Sundgren called “blips,” aren’t a problem for residential areas but greatly affect the University.

“Little blips aren’t a problem for residential areas,” Sundgren said. “They will only need to fix their clocks. For U.Va., blips shut down our plants.”

The University partners with Dominion Virginia Power to provide electricity to all University buildings. Sundgren said the University has created a plan which will eliminate over 90 percent of power outages. The plan — informally called the Underground Express — will feed power through an underground system to University buildings. The design for the plan has been completed.

The blackout greatly affected the students living in Old Dorms. First-year College student Hannah Noah, a resident of Bonnycastle Dorm, said the blackout disrupted her studies.

“When the power is out at night, I have to wait to finish necessary readings for class,” Noah said. “It is also a problem if I need to charge my computer for online work or print something.”

The rat that caused the power outage has since died.

