

The Goretzka Case

Kaitlynn Riely / The Pittsburgh Press

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette®

Family applauds complaint filed by PUC on power line that killed Irwin woman

The family of an Irwin woman who died three years ago when a high-voltage power line fell on her was "heartened" by a complaint filed recently by the state Public Utility Commission against Greensburg-based West Penn Power.

For Michael J. Goretzka, the most important part of the complaint was the request that in the next year West Penn Power inspect and, if necessary, replace all lines similar to the 7,200-volt line that fell on his wife, Carrie Goretzka, said Shanin Specter, the family's Philadelphia-based attorney, in a phone interview.

"We take a lot of things in this world for granted, but nothing more than the integrity of power lines over our heads. Every citizen in southwestern Pennsylvania passes beneath power lines, usually dozens of times a day," Mr. Specter said today. "We have to know that those power lines aren't going to fall."

In addition to requesting line inspections, the PUC complaint calls for West Penn Power to pay up to \$86,000 in civil penalties; to properly train its employees in preparing and cleaning wire connections or splices; and to increase its supervision of employees doing line work.

A spokesman for West Penn Power, a subsidiary of Akron-based FirstEnergy Corp., did not immediately return requests for comment. The company has 20 days to respond and agree or disagree with the PUC decision. The complaint could proceed to Commonwealth Court if West Penn continues to appeal.

Ms. Goretzka's family has also filed a lawsuit against West Penn Power, and the case is scheduled to go to trial in November, Mr. Specter said.

Goretzka family members were not available for comment, Mr. Specter said, but he called the last three years "a terrible ordeal for the family."

"It is not possible, in my estimation, to imagine a more horrific event occurring in a family than the death of a mother occurring in this gruesome manner," Mr. Specter said.

There were no adverse weather conditions on June 2, 2009, when Ms. Goretzka, 39, noticed a fire coming from the power lines in the backyard of her West Hempfield Drive home, according to the lawsuit filed by the Goretzka family.

She went into the side yard to call 911 and was struck to the ground by a falling power line. She was shocked and her body caught fire. Her mother-in-law attempted to help as Carrie Goretzka's daughters Chloe, then 4 and Carlie, then 2, watched. Ms. Goretzka died three days later.