

By JESSICA CRAWFORD

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It was lights out for much of Liberal Tuesday afternoon as a result of a weakened wire that ultimately burned, according to Southern Pioneer Electric Manager of Operations Chad Mease. The exact cause of the incident was unclear. However, Mease said, he has his suspicions.

When asked if a cause had been determined Mease replied, "Honestly, no."

Mease did suggest the possibility of a vehicle striking the pole to be the cause of the event that left 1,455 Southern Pioneer Electric consumers without power for approximately two hours and 20 minutes.

"The only thing that we could find that might be a contributing factor, but we don't know for sure, there is a mark on the pole that looks as if somebody ran into it with a car," he said. "But, there were witnesses across the street when it burned down and nobody saw a car. So, it may have been from this weekend or a couple of weeks ago.

"It finally just gave, we don't know. The wires burned right on top of the cross arm, which is really odd," he explained. "That is why I can't give a good reason why it happened. The wire for some reason got weak and it physically burned, and it arcs and sparks like an arc welder. It burned in two because it was getting weak and it was trying to conduct a load, but part of it was gone. So, it gets thin and it gets hot and then it gets thinner until eventually it just blows apart. Then it fell down into the wires down below that and burned it down – it happened in a bad spot."

The exact location, Mease said, was at the intersection of Fourth Street and New York Avenue.

Seward County Emergency Management Director Greg Standard said in an event such as this, several things must occur in order to maintain safety throughout the city – especially when traffic signal devices are not in service.

“We get a little involved in it,” Standard said. “We monitor and find out if it is going to be a long term deal or short term, which, of course, it was short term and part of the town – so it wasn’t everybody.

“As soon as someone calls it in they send the street department, sheriff’s officers and police officers to try to make sure we didn’t have any accidents with that,” he explained. “Then I kind of check on some of the infrastructure stuff to make sure that we had power to those, the courthouse and some of those facilities.”

Thankfully, Standard said, Southwest Medical Center, Liberal Springs, Good Samaritan Center and Wheatridge Park Care Center were not affected by Tuesday afternoon’s power outage.

“The hospital was still on and did not switch over to generated power, which was good,” he said. “Of course, we would expect them to be fine if they did have to switch over, but nonetheless it is just better if they don’t have to do that.

“It is more expensive,” he added. “But mostly it is because if everything else goes wrong, we know we have people who need to have (electricity) as a matter of life and death. That is why we worry about the hospital. The hospital and the care homes were all on, too, so everything was OK.”

Liberal Police Department Capt. Pat McClurg said the outage, although inconvenient for the community, was relatively uneventful with no accidents due to the lack of traffic signals.

“Actually, things went pretty smooth,” McClurg said. “We had some traffic lights that were out downtown, but we didn’t have any accidents or anything as a result of it. Everything worked out pretty well.”

Although all was back to normal nearly two and a half hours following the initial detection of the outage, Southern Pioneer Electric employees were on sight this morning to ensure no further problems were to be expected.

“The crews went back this morning just to do some more visual checking,” Mease said. “All consumers were back on yesterday afternoon, and everything is back to normal.”