

Met-Ed metal mystery solved?

Citizen Crime Watch is credited with key role in catching suspect

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Reading Eagle

As the list of reported break-ins of Met-Ed substations since early April grew, investigators began to notice a pattern: The thief would return a second time to steal the copper ground wire soon after crews repaired the damage.

So police and Met-Ed officials pinpointed the substations that were the next likely targets and set up various forms of surveillance.

Figuring marked police cars would scare off a would-be thief, Amity Township police Thursday asked a couple of members of its citizen Crime Watch to keep an eye out overnight for anyone suspicious in the area of the Pine Lane substation off Old Swede Road near Douglassville.

The red-eye detail paid off.

Friday about 3 a.m., police received a report from the citizen group that a suspicious man was walking in the 800 block of Old Swede Road, also known as Route 662. While Officer Thomas Gauby Jr., the department's Crime Watch liaison, and Officer Brian Devlin were heading to the substation, an alarm system that Met-Ed recently installed signaled police that a break-in was occurring.

Devlin arrived first and saw a man inside the security fence and arrested him at gunpoint.

Maurice L. Ohlinger, 47, of the 400 block of Robeson Street was caught red-handed with a bolt cutter, cable cutter and a bag of freshly cut copper or copper plated wire, police said.

"Right place, right time, right help," Amity Police Chief Kent A. Shuebrook said.

Ohlinger was interviewed by Detective Sgt. S. Brian Horner of the Northern Berks Regional police and admitted to also breaking into a Muhlenberg Township substation earlier in the night and removing ground wire, Horner said. Ohlinger dropped that wire off at his home before heading to Douglassville, Horner said.

Horner spearheaded the investigation of 19 break-ins at Met-Ed substations throughout Berks since April 12 that caused at least \$100,000 damage. Met-Ed has about 72 electric substations in Berks County.

Workers had been unable to keep up with repairing the damage, said Horner, whose investigation kept him up at nights.

"Knowing how much cost there was to Met-Ed and that other departments were getting hit and no one was in charge, I figured I'd step up to the plate," Horner said. "I talked with my chief (Scott W. Eaken) and he let me run with the investigation and I started contacting other departments."

Cooperating in the investigation were police from Cumru, Exeter, Oley and Amity townships; Birdsboro, Fleetwood and Boyertown; and state troopers in Reading.

Met-Ed facilities in Allentown, Cumru, Exeter and Pottsville, and in Berks County, which is



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Met-Ed employee Gene Lawrence unloads a roll of copper Friday at the utility's substation along Old Swede Road in Amity Township. The copper was used to replace ground wire that was cut and removed hours earlier by a thief who was caught in the act.

Met-Ed facilities in Alsace, Cumru, Exeter and Richmond townships and Birdsboro, and Leesport - which is covered by Northern Berks police - were among those broken into, Horner said.

Meanwhile, PPL Electric Utilities officials this week reported that about \$100,000 in equipment was damaged at 13 sites in western Berks.

Horner said there is no evidence linking the PPL and Met-Ed burglaries, but PPL spokesman Kurt Blumenau said he was happy to hear of the arrest and planned to contact Horner for more information.

Met-Ed spokesman Scott Surgeoner said: "We are particularly pleased that Amity Township police made an arrest. We are going to continue to be vigilant and ask the public to continue to report suspicious activity near any of our facilities."

Horner said police already had Ohlinger under surveillance because he had sold 62 pounds of Met-Ed wire on Thursday. Met-Ed spray-painted its cables to make them easier to identify.

Ohlinger was committed to Berks County Prison in lieu of \$500,000 bail following video arraignment before District Judge Andrea Book in Reading Central Court. Ohlinger was charged with two counts of burglary, trespassing, criminal mischief and receiving stolen property in the Friday break-ins.

Horner said the investigation of the other burglaries continues and he will seek an order from District Attorney John T. Adams to have any other charges from various police departments filed through District Judge Victor Frederick's office in Oley.

Horner said Ohlinger, formerly of Birdsboro, told him that he is self-employed and sometimes does electrical work on his own, although he is not a certified electrician and never worked for an electric utility.

"He said he just knew about electricity," Horner said.

(Reporter Dan Kelly contributed to this story.)

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