

putting 58 miles of utility lines underground

6 comments by [Diana Balazs](#) - May. 27, 2009 10:25 AM
The Arizona Republic

Unseen [electrical power](#) poles continue to topple in Paradise Valley as town officials and the Arizona Public Service Co. work to complete the underground conversion of 58 miles of utility line along the town's major streets and in older neighborhoods. On Jan. 19, 1988, Paradise Valley voters approved a franchise agreement with APS to bury the overhead electrical lines in APS' distribution area. Since then, nearly 56 miles of line has been converted, said John Rael, APS underground utility conversion project manager.

To date, the town and APS have spent about \$24 million to convert the lines. The franchise agreement was originally set to expire in 1998, but has been extended several times. The existing agreement expires in 2015.

The most ambitious project was completed in June 2004 when 99 high-voltage poles were removed along Lincoln Drive, the town's main thoroughfare. Paradise Valley and APS officials cite aesthetics and safety as the reasons for removing power poles.

"Aesthetically, it's going to be beautiful, but, more importantly, for safety reasons, it will be extremely beneficial," said Paradise Valley Mayor Vernon Parker. The removal of the poles will open up views in Paradise Valley, Parker added. In the past, summer storms have toppled poles in Paradise Valley, causing outages and traffic delays. Lightning also has struck poles and transformers, damaging them and starting fires.

"When you have lines that are overhead, you're subject to branches breaking off and blowing into lines," Rael said.

Parker recalled when he lived on Indian Bend Road, a eucalyptus tree fell on a power line and created an electrical surge through his home.

"The house almost caught on fire and it destroyed every [electrical appliance](#) we had in the house," Parker said.

APS is upgrading a system that would have been replaced as needed on a case-by-case basis, Rael said.

Paradise Valley requires developers of new subdivisions to place utility lines underground. The same goes for individual new homes built, as well as existing homes that cost at least \$500,000 to remodel. But there are older neighborhoods with power poles more than 40 years old. Those residents will benefit from the conversions, which can be challenging.

"You're taking an older electrical system and you're trying to mesh it with a new electrical system. It's kind of a give or take. It's not exact. It's not like starting with a brand new subdivision where everything is brand new. It's kind of a retrofit," Rael said. Of the town's 36 neighborhood conversion districts, two are currently under construction and another is cleared for design. That leaves only three districts left. The town has sent letters to lot owners in those three districts, asking them if they wish to participate, said town engineer Bill Mead. He said he has heard from residents concerned about the tight economy who want to participate, but cannot afford to at this time.

A non-hillside lot owner pays the town \$1,500 to participate. Those on a hillside lot pay \$4,500. That does not include the cost of connecting [electrical service](#) to the house, which lot owners must pay as well.

APS serves the bulk of the town. Paradise Valley does not have a similar franchise agreement with the Salt River Project, but has worked with SRP on individual projects to remove poles, Mead said.

APS' Rael works with town officials and residents in locating the necessary equipment needed for the new underground system. Many residents believe that when the overhead lines go underground, there is nothing visible left.

"The poles are removed and the wires go underground, but in its place are the transformers and equipment cabinets," Rael said.

The sand-colored boxes are placed in locations designed to minimize their impact on a neighborhood, Rael said.