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POLITICS

San Diego will double the pace of utility undergrounding work as size of task grows

By DAVID GARRICK

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San Diego —

- San Diego will accelerate and revamp the city's approach to relocating overhead utility lines underground.
- Inaccurate schedules and other problems have created community backlash.
- City officials recently discovered they have 25 percent more lines to bury than they knew.

San Diego is accelerating how quickly it buries utility lines across the city, shrinking the size of projects to boost efficiency and creating more accurate schedules so neighborhoods know when to expect such work.

Projects will also more closely follow San Diego Gas & Electric's circuitry to avoid the fate of Sherman Heights, where undergrounding was completed years ago but utility poles remain in place to serve other parts of the electricity grid.

Neighborhoods generally embrace undergrounding projects because they boost aesthetics, increase property values, reduce fire risk and ease the maintenance of utility wires.

Some neighborhoods, however, have rebelled against undergrounding because of construction hassles, the city's inability to stick to schedules and unattractive utility boxes blocking sidewalks when projects are complete.

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The revamped approach, which includes a new [master plan](#) the City Council is expected to approve later this year, aims to solve many of those problems while also giving residents more input into the process.

Community leaders say it's crucial that city officials honor a recent commitment to allow resident input before the design for an undergrounding project is finalized.

San Diego's revamped approach may also help alleviate the city's struggle to spend the 3.5 percent surcharges it has been collecting from ratepayers since 2003 to cover the work.

The surcharges raised about \$30 million per year after they were put in place in 2003, but that has climbed to more than \$60 million per year as utility bills have risen and the local population has grown.

San Diego's utility undergrounding account has accumulated more than \$158 million in reserves, an amount city officials hope to shrink by doubling the number of projects they tackle each year.

City officials also recently discovered they have 25 percent more utility lines to bury than previously thought — 1,250 miles versus 1,000. The updated number is based on more accurate information provided by SDG&E.

The city has buried 428 miles of power lines since the project began in 1970, so the remaining 1,250 miles won't be buried until well into the next century if the pace doesn't quicken.

Before the surcharge, San Diego was burying utility lines at a rate of about 8 miles per year. Since the surcharge, the rate has doubled to about 15 miles per year.

The city plans to soon double that rate to about 30 miles per year, James Nabong, the city's new manager for the program, told the City Council's Environment Committee last week.

"We are currently looking at ways to accumulate more work volume at a faster pace," Nabong said. "The good news is the available revenue streaming in to fund the program will support a higher rate of undergrounding conversion."

In addition to moving faster, the city is shrinking project areas and making sure they are based on SDG&E circuitry.

David Moty, chairman of an umbrella organization for the city's neighborhood planning groups, said by phone that smaller projects seem like a smart idea.

"That makes it less likely for a project to get out of control, or for them to run into some insurmountable problem," he said.

The new approach will also use community or neighborhood names for each project, in contrast to a previous practice of using numbers and letters to identify projects.

The updated master plan will also include a "[five-year implementation plan](#)," which will give residents a more accurate estimate of when undergrounding will happen in their neighborhood.

The existing master plan, which dates back to 2009, provided estimates much further into the future that rarely ended up being accurate.

“We need a new master plan because the schedule in the old one didn’t hold water,” said Moty, adding that a five-year horizon makes more sense. “When they do give you dates they are more sure of them, and beyond that they just don’t give you dates any more because they couldn’t maintain them.”

Basing work on SDG&E circuitry, instead of geography alone, will also help avoid problems like those faced in Sherman Heights.

Because areas chosen there for undergrounding didn’t match up with the circuitry, power poles have had to remain in place there to avoid cutting off electricity to nearby areas within the same power grid.

Moty said a revision to the process that’s arguably more important than any other is the recommendations of a volunteer task force in 2016 that planning for undergrounding projects include resident input early in the process.

City and SDG&E officials embraced the new approach when it was unveiled, but Moty said it hasn’t yet been implemented.

“It’s about the community getting ahead of the design before the design is finished so they can suggest things,” he said. “I’ve been telling the planning groups ‘you’re part of this process, don’t pass up the opportunity to have a say in the design.’”

The new process was prompted by backlash against the utility boxes neighborhoods get after the overhead poles are removed.

From Kensington to parts of La Jolla and Point Loma, neighborhoods have lobbied city officials to delay planned utility undergrounding projects because they dislike the square metal boxes.

The main complaints are that they often get placed in the middle of sidewalks where they reduce walkability and become magnets for graffiti.

“It’s a tradeoff,” Moty said. “If the poles were really obtrusive and the boxes aren’t, you’ve got a plus. If the poles had previously been hidden and the boxes are obtrusive, you’ve got a minus”

If residents can see the designs before construction begins, they can request modifications or decide against moving forward, Moty said.

The revamped approach won’t affect any undergrounding projects already in the city’s pipeline, but it will apply to all future projects, Nabong said.

Neighborhoods listed in the first year of the [five-year implementation plan](#) are in La Jolla, Pacific Beach, Midtown, Mission Hills, North Park, Bay Terraces, Chollas View, Skyline, Clairemont, Lake Murray, Serra Mesa, Logan Heights, Fairmont Village and Southcrest.

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