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County looking at undergrouding utilities as part of widening, but questions remain

• Phil Creed • April 7, 2019 • Politics, Traffic and Transportation



Above ground utility lines are part of the current streetscape on Richmond Highway.

Fairfax County is examining the undergrounding of utilities as part of the Richmond Highway widening project, but there is no agreement yet on who will pay for it or even how much the undergrounding would cost.

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The current scope of VDOT's \$372 million widening project still includes moving utilities, not burying them, along the 2.9 mile-stretch between Jeff Todd Way and Sherwood Hall Lane. Doing so will cost about \$15 million, according to VDOT.

To underground utilities, Dominion Energy has estimated that it will cost around \$60 million. But there's no agreement on how to generate the additional \$45 million, and Mount Vernon Supervisor Dan Storck said last week that the estimate itself is a problem.

"The number one issue that still is a puzzle to me that my office is working very hard to figure out is why Prince William County was essentially able to underground their utilities for about \$3 million a mile and why the price tag that we keep getting from Dominion ... is about \$15 million [per mile]," Storck said. "That's a core issue I'm trying to [understand]."

A Dominion Energy spokesman declined to comment on the difference between the two projects, and described the cost estimate given to Fairfax County officials as a "ballpark" figure.

"We selected a section of the route and gave them a ballpark estimate," said Dominion spokesman Charles Penn. "From that, they could extrapolate, depending on how much they decide to underground."

Storck, along with other members of the Board of Supervisors and county officials, will be getting together with representatives from Dominion, Verizon, Cox and other providers to discuss the issue. Storck, who asked the county to arrange the meeting at a March Board meeting, said that the groups will be meeting soon.

"There's just a lot of moving parts, that's the bottom line," Storck said.

New funding mechanism

A new law passed last month helped bring the issue of undergrounding utilities as part of the widening project back to the forefront. State Sen. Scott Surovell, whose 36th district includes a large portion of the Route 1 area, sponsored a bill in the Virginia General Assembly to create a pilot program specifically for Fairfax County to help pay for undergrounding as part of a transit-oriented project — such as the Richmond Highway widening.

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MAY
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The bill allows the county to levy a monthly tax — it cannot exceed \$1 per month — on residents' electric bills that would go toward funding the undergrounding. Surovell estimates the power bill levy can generate close to \$30 million over 20 years, which by itself would cover half the total cost of undergrounding. The funding mechanism could also be used as a model for other projects around the county, Surovell said.

"This pilot project would allow them to get their toe in the water and learn about the logistics of doing this," said Surovell. "It would help set up county-wide program."

But the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors has concerns with the levy, as well as broader questions about how it will come up with the money needed up front for undergrounding, and who else will be contributing to that sum.

The Board sent a letter to Gov. Ralph Northam last month voicing concerns about Surovell's bill, saying it would be tough for the county to pay for the undergrounding up front and then recoup the money over time through the levy.

"Advancing such a large sum of money for one project may not be possible, as County resources are already stretched thin by increasing needs for core services ..." the Board of Supervisors said in the letter, which unsuccessfully asked the governor to offer amendments to Surovell's bill.

The letter also suggested the costs of undergrounding be split between the state, the utilities and the county.

"Because this project is a joint effort, the County believes that all parties should participate in its costs," the board's letter said. "It is our hope that, given the funding mechanism included in the legislation, the upfront costs could be shared by the Commonwealth, the utilities, and the County, with all entities being repaid equitably over time."

In a letter responding to the Board's letter, Surovell said the county should not expect any more help from the state because traditionally Virginia has not paid for undergrounding projects that are not considered essential.

Storck said Wednesday that Surovell's bill is "a piece in a complex equation" on figuring out how to fund the undergrounding.

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"It's gonna be a challenge about how we can use that legislation," Storck said. "We view it as another arrow in the quiver."

Other possible contributors

Surovell said that Verizon spoke with him about undergrounding during the General Assembly session and that company reps said they would be willing to cover its costs if it could use the duct bank that Dominion would be building. That would drive down the total cost of undergrounding, Surovell said.

A Verizon spokesman confirmed last week that the company was willing to cover its "obligations" if Dominion and the county can come to an agreement.

"We have worked closely with Senator Surovell and will meet our obligations for moving our network facilities if the project is approved," Verizon spokesman David Weissmann said. "If conduit space is made available to us we are willing to move the facilities underground."

By Surovell's estimates, Verizon's contributions and the levy on electric bills would leave \$21 million in funding still up in the air — a number that would presumably be covered by the county.

Surovell said that the county's budget surplus last year was three times that amount, and added that he believes the county is dragging its feet on undergrounding. He jabbed county officials by noting that Prince William County, with a smaller tax base, has undergrounded utilities as part of their own Route 1 widening project.

"If [Prince William County Board Chairman] Corey Stewart can pay for it, than the Fairfax County Board can find money for Route 1," said Surovell.

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One Response

NoVA Dave

This should have been a part of the original plan from the get-go

April 8, 2019

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