Undergrounding the Utilities on Main Street Southborough
in conjunction with the Main Street Reconstruction Project

Information for Southborough Residents

(Presented by: The Main Street Council)

Q: What *is* "undergrounding"?

A: Undergrounding is the process of burying overhead power, telephone and cable lines and removing the utility poles which currently hold them.

Q: Why is Southborough considering "undergrounding" at this time?

A: "Undergrounding" the utilities along Main Street was called for in Southborough's Master Plan. With Main Street scheduled for a major State funded Road Reconstruction Project within the next 5 years, it was determined that this would be the only time that undergrounding made sense. This initiative would piggyback on the Road Reconstruction Project, minimize the disruption to the Main Street residents and businesses, reduce the costs of undergrounding to the Town, and maximize the visual impact on Southborough as a community once the entire project was completed.

Q: Just how extensive is this upcoming Road Reconstruction Project?

A: The road project is not just a repaving. It is a major RECONSTRUCTION of the entire roadway which will cause extensive disruption for both the residents and businesses in Southborough. It will involve excavating the full right-of-way to a depth of over 2 feet, requiring thousands of truckloads of road material to be displaced, and it will continue for over a two year period. In order for the town to meet the State requirements, many utility poles will have to be moved to new locations. With undergrounding, these poles will be removed PERMANENTLY and not replaced along the right-of-way or in the sidewalks.

Q: What are the benefits of undergrounding?

A: Burying the utility wires underground serves many purposes. Some are purely aesthetic, some affect the system reliability, and others provide financial benefits. Here are some of the reasons to put the lines underground:

- **Aesthetics:** The overhead lines can only be described as ugly. The space they occupy is becoming increasingly congested with additional lines and equipment. Utility company practices frequently violate city and state ordinances. For example, double poles are left in place for more than the 90 days allowed, excess coils of cable are left dangling or tacked to a pole rather than being trimmed off or secured properly, and debris is left on the street. Verizon has now added "orange" conduit to the utility poles to make them appear even more unattractive and the wires are being placed even lower on the poles. (Please view: recently completed new intersection at Richards Road and 85)
- **Reliability:** Multiple studies have concluded that underground utilities are more reliable after the initial installation, with as few as one third the number of failures as are experienced with overhead lines on poles. An overhead system is more vulnerable to storm related outages, having poles downed by vehicles, and lines downed by tree limbs.
- **Sidewalks:** Once Main Street is widened and new sidewalks (with granite curbs) are installed, there will be little room available in the road "right of way" to accommodate the parking, sidewalks, AND utility poles, so the poles will end up sharing the space within the sidewalk. (Please view: recently completed new intersection at Richards Road and 85)
- **The Common:** There is concern that the Road Reconstruction Project will reduce the size of our historic Common. Removing the utility poles and repairing the stone wall on the South Side of the Common would certainly help mitigate the impact of the possible reduction.
- **Safety:** Poles present hazards for motor vehicles and downed lines present electrical and fire hazards.
- **Value:** Property values of the entire town will be affected when utility poles do not interfere with views along historic Main Street and downtown. A proof in point is that nine out of ten new subdivisions opt for underground utilities even though they are initially more expensive.
- **Trees:** Utility lines force unnecessary, unhealthy and improper pruning of trees solely at the discretion of the power company. This also contributes to the aesthetic issues surrounding overhead lines. Without the utility poles, our Historic District of Southborough can again have a canopy of trees on both sides of Main Street in time for our town's 300 year celebration.
- **Efficiency:** Underground cables can use larger conductors resulting in less energy loss.

Q: What are the downsides of undergrounding?

A: Critics of undergrounding are quick to point out issues that accompany that effort. These are generally in the areas of cost and duration of outages.

- **Cost:** Undergrounding existing utility lines is expensive, but those costs are usually passed along to all town residents in the form of a minimal surcharge on their utility, phone, and cable bills. State law mandates that this surcharge can be up to, but no more than 2% of your bill. A Feasibility Study is being completed by landscape architect & design/engineering firm Beals & Thomas and civil engineering firm Tighe & Bond to determine the actual cost to the residents of Southborough. Undergrounding telephone and cable-television lines adds to the cost and will be included in the study. Once the actual costs are determined, your Board of Selectmen will set the surcharge at ½% to 2% of your bill depending on how long they decide the payment period needs to be.
- **Disruption:** Southborough's planned Road Reconstruction Project will cause Main Street to be under excavation for more than one year. Pairing the undergrounding work with the existing road work will add some additional disruption to the residents but the overall results will be so dramatic that the added inconvenience will seem minimal. Undergrounding on private property sometimes entails digging trenches in lawns or gardens but will be necessary to complete the project.
- **Repair:** It is generally acknowledged that while failures are less frequent with underground cables, the average time and cost to troubleshoot and repair each failure that does occur is significantly higher. Estimates exist which suggest that the repair time is about 1.6 times longer and the cost can be as much as 4 times higher. The impact of repair can also be aggravated if it necessitates tearing up the road.

Q: Will undergrounding eliminate all above ground lines and equipment?

A: While undergrounding would eliminate all above ground lines, there would still be some equipment such as transformers that would have to be located above ground on concrete pads.

Q: What happens to the streetlights when the poles are no longer needed because wires have been put underground?

A: Those currently mounted on the utility poles would have to be put on lampposts with the electricity fed from underground. Many communities elect to use decorative poles, especially in historic districts with flag poles or banners. Please take a drive through the parking lot of the Town House and take a look at the poles in the center island. Imagine how those decorative poles would look along the Common and Downtown.

Q: Who bears the cost of connecting a property to the underground cabling?

A: This cost of connecting the wires from the street to the property owner is usually borne by the entire community and factored into the entire cost of the project. Unlike a "sewer" assessment which directly impacts the homeowners along the project, Undergrounding is considered a "betterment" that benefits the entire community. Many communities feel that property owners along the Road Reconstruction and Undergrounding route will bear the entire brunt of the extensive disruption to their neighborhood and businesses and therefore should not be subject any additional expenses related to this extensive project. These property owners would pay the same pro-rata share as the rest of the community.

Q: Does the entire Main Street have to underground all the lines at the same time?

A: No. Many towns have chosen to underground utilities in certain areas first. Southborough is planning on undergrounding from the new Main Entrance to the Fay School to Park Street in conjunction with the State Road Reconstruction Project. The second phase of undergrounding will be the downtown area from Park Street to Newton Street.

Q: How much will this undergrounding cost?

A: The exact cost of the Undergrounding Project is being determined by a Feasibility Study funded by private contributions to The Main Street Council and provided free of charge to the Town. This comprehensive study is being completed by a Southborough architectural design firm Beals & Thomas and a Worcester civil engineering firm Tighe & Bond. Once the Study is complete, the costs will be reviewed by the Planning Board, the Board of Selectmen, the Advisory Committee, and the Capital Budget Planning Committee to determine how the Town wants to proceed.

Q: Who pays for the cost of undergrounding?

A: Even though Southborough is responsible for securing funding for burying the utility lines underground along public roads, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has provided a mechanism for the towns to collect the necessary funds to pay the cost of the undergrounding.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has a law on the books, www.mass.gov/legis/laws/mgl/166-22b , which forces the utilities to cooperate with the communities in their undergrounding efforts.
The law also mandates that the electric and telecomm utilities collect a prescribed surcharge on the cost of delivering their services. All rate-payers have to pay the surcharge (but not more than 2% of the bill) when this funding method is used. The funds generated by the surcharge are collected by each utility and *must be* used to pay that utility's costs of moving their infrastructure underground.

Significant savings can be achieved if the road is under construction and undergrounding is performed at the same time.

Q: Does Southborough have to vote on a Warrant Article at Town Meeting in order for the State Legislature to pass this law to force the utility companies to underground their wires?

A: Yes. Southborough's Planning Board has already scheduled a Warrant Article for the April 13th, 2009 Town Meeting. This Warrant Article will not create a financial commitment by Southborough in any way, but is only a first step in the process of moving this initiative forward.

Q: Does Southborough derive any financial benefit from undergrounding?

A: Yes, but for a surprising reason: "underground" lines ARE subject to taxation, while lines "on poles" are not taxes at this time.

Q: Have any other Massachusetts cities and towns been active in recent years in burying wires?

A: Yes. Other towns in Massachusetts including Concord, Wellesley, Bedford, Norfolk, Duxbury, Nantucket, Holden, Natick, and Needham have completed projects to bury wires. Other towns that currently have projects underway include Shrewsbury, Chelmsford, North Andover, and Westwood.