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Look up and see... wires

By Lois Biener | August 27, 2005

IN STARK contrast to the public outcry at the sight of a single wind generator on the Boston skyline, there has been relatively little response to the creeping wire blight outside most of our front doors. Utility providers are getting a free ride as they add more and more overhead wires and equipment. In addition to the visual pollution, the wires and poles are increasingly a safety hazard. Last July, Newton Centre was effectively shuttered when six utility poles crashed down on Beacon Street, most likely due to a truck snagging a low-hanging wire.

The utilities have gotten away with it thus far because of the slow-motion nature of this pollution — initially, a pole here and there, three or four slim wires almost hidden in the leaves. But poles that once held a few electric wires and a telephone wire now support nine or more. Heavy junction boxes and tension brackets make tracks across the wires and across our view of the sky. Poles are now sprouting permanent work platforms left there for the company's convenience. Coils of unused wire are left behind, perhaps waiting for the opportunity to bring in a new customer. It's as if you had a neighbor who parked his business's dumpster and inventory in your front yard.

Each new cable provider leases space from the pole owner and increases visual pollution for the rest of us. The most intrusive cable is the most recent one installed by Verizon as part of its multimillion dollar broadband fiber-to-the-premises deployment, known as Fios. How many more companies will add to the blight in the future?

In Newton, city ordinances were designed to minimize the intrusiveness of overhead wires, requiring wires to be placed together in bundles and not strung helter skelter along the streets. No unused coil or loose end of wire may be left on the ground or remain attached to a pole for more than 24 hours. All unused or abandoned wires must be removed in 24 hours, or the owner or lessee of the wire must pay the expense of having the city do the removal. Poles must be maintained in good repair and upright.

State law mandates that double poles, erected when a pole is replaced or relocated, must be removed within 90 days. Clearly, our ordinances are not enforced. Even after hearings before the state Department of Telecommunications and Energy, NStar and Verizon still have hundreds of double poles in Newton in violation of state law.

What is to be done? The best option is to bury the wires in underground conduits. This is done in all new developments in Newton, but the cost of undergrounding in established communities is high — between \$500,000 and \$2 million per mile. According to current state law, this cost must be borne entirely by utility customers in communities served by NStar or Mass Electric via surcharges to their bills. This is an unpopular option, and an unfair one: NStar or Mass Electric shareholders end up with an updated, more reliable system at no cost to them. There are possibly other funding mechanisms, which our Newton Task Force is investigating.

Meanwhile, do we have to remain helpless while our graceful residential streets are being transformed into industrial corridors of dense cables and ancillary hardware? Do we have to permit our neighborhoods to function as storehouses for idle cable company equipment so that their stockholders can benefit from the free use of our environmental resources?

We must not remain passive while this abuse continues. We must, first of all, demand that these companies respect our visual environment and not erect sloppy tangles of wires and hardware with the only goal of reducing their labor costs and increasing their profits. We must require that they pay fair value for access to our streets and that they contribute to a multi-year plan to place their infrastructure underground. We must add teeth to the current municipal ordinances and state laws and implement additional regulations that take account of new developments in fiber-optic business practices. At the very least, we need to look up and speak up.

Lois Biener is chairman of the Newton Task Force on Undergrounding Utilities.■

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