

Select Board caves to National Grid: above-ground wire installation approved

By Brian Bushard

bbushard@inkym.com The controversial 1.5-mile proposed above-ground National Grid utility project that met with criticism from town officials, preservationists and residents alike last summer is now set for installation.

The power line will run along poles from the electricity provider's Candle Street substation to the Milestone Rotary.

The Select Board unanimously approved the project last week, arguing the need to increase the power capacity on the east side of the island outweighs the immediate desire to put the line underground.

Select Board chairwoman Dawn Holdgate saw the approval as a starting point. The town should start planning to move all overhead wires underground moving forward, she said.

"The only wire National Grid was willing to discuss undergrounding was this one," Holdgate said.

"It would not have any impact on any of their other wires. The poles would still be there and it would be a massive project, about 18 months, to go underground with only the one wire and nothing else. It's better time and funding spent to put it underground in the future where all the utilities could be done at once. It could be done piece by piece and street by street as opportunities arise."

The project will replace 38 of the 79 existing poles over the 1.5-mile route with taller and wider alternatives, and bundle several existing wires together, in some cases reducing the number of electric lines.

National Grid manager Joe Cardinal said upgrades are needed to avoid power outages in the summer. Any work should start before the summer peak load and as early as June, he said.

"We're reaching summer capacities," Cardinal told the Select Board last week. "The wire could potentially fail and outages will result until repairs are completed."

He estimated the project would cost approximately \$3 million, and would be paid for by the electricity provider's ratepayers across the state. Any utility work would also require temporary road closures, most likely reducing them to one lane [WIRES, PAGE 3A](#)

Select Board caves to National Grid: above-ground wire installation approved

(Continued from page 1A)

during installation.

The project met with pushback when the board first discussed it last summer. Opponents argued the plan would obstruct views and make sidewalk accessibility difficult, especially on smaller streets like East Dover Street, Back Street and parts of Orange Street.

Jim Sulzer, who lives on Back Street, was one of the opponents.

“It’s an opportunity lost for this particular project, but hopefully a lesson was learned from this if it leads to better coordination in the future,” Sulzer said.

For Planning Board chairwoman Judith Wegner, the issue last summer was that the project was rushed forward without any public input. Over the winter, both the Planning Board and the town’s environmental consultant, Environmental Partners, met to discuss the route of the above-ground line. They agreed to proceed with National Grid’s original route and start installation this summer. Moving forward, the goal is to start installing wires underground.

Wegner said she is comfortable with that. The only concern for her now is having taller poles along Washington Street that could potentially come down in windstorms.

“There was a lot more dialogue, having all the Select Board members go out and look at the route, and listen to the Planning Board, that’s a more fruitful way to have a dialogue,” Wegner said.

“I just don’t understand why they don’t have more thorough publicly-shared information about why the system they’re proposing is a good idea. It seems to me with higher poles and more intense storms, it can’t be the best solution.”

Select Board member Matt Fee shared Wegner’s concern. He argued that utilities should be put underground so poles won’t topple in the wind, just like they should be placed away from the flood zone so National Grid can access them in possible cases of malfunctions during floods.

“Undergrounding is an aesthetic issue, it’s an access and sidewalk issue, but it’s also a resiliency issue,” Fee said. “One thing in resiliency planning is burying your stuff as much as possible because then a big storm doesn’t wipe out your power.”

The question for Fee now is when the utilities should be put underground. Doing so should mean reconfiguring the sewer, water and stormwater lines that are already underground, and it should all be done at once, he said.

That way, town agencies like the Sewer Department and the Department of Public Works would be able to access water and sewer lines easily, and the streets themselves would not have to be ripped up, repaired and replaced every time something new is put underground, he said.

“Some of them might get done in 10 years, and some in 30 years,” Fee said. “But what’s the long-term best way to handle it, and it might be moving them to higher ground and putting them underground. It might make the most sense to look at a street, see what else is underground, then pull up a sidewalk, run a bank under it, then put it back later.”

The town is now working on a memorandum of understanding with National Grid to install the 1.5-mile aboveground project. Construction is anticipated to begin as early as June and last several months.

“It’s an opportunity lost for this particular project, but hopefully a lesson was learned from this.”

– Jim Sulzer Back Street resident