Memorandum
Update on Initiative to Move York Village Overhead Utility Lines Underground

To: Members of the Town of York Board of Selectmen, Steve Burns, Dean Lessard
From: Village Revitalization Steering Committee
Date: June 18, 2019

Background

Relocating overhead utility lines below ground in all or part of the Village Revitalization project area would greatly enhance the scenic appearance of the Village. The relocation of utility lines and elimination of poles in the Village project area was a notable feature of the 2015 Village Master Plan. Unfortunately, the initial cost estimate of $8 million to move the overhead lines underground in the entire project area was quickly deemed impractical. The committee learned that, unlike the road work and sidewalk improvements proposed, underground utility project costs do not qualify for traditional Federal or State funding. Our research was unable to find any potential sources of outside funding. In addition, utility companies are not obligated to pay the cost of relocating existing utilities underground. Thus, moving existing overhead utilities underground falls to the municipality requesting the work.

While the original estimate for moving all Village utilities underground was cost prohibitive, the committee continued to pursue two alternatives over the last 18 months, briefly discussed below.

Options Considered for Scaling Back Underground Utilities

Option 1. Move current overhead utilities below ground in the right of way in a portion of the project area while retaining existing overhead utilities elsewhere.

In order to establish priority area(s), the committee performed a site walk in February 2018 and ranked all the poles in the project area. Poles were evaluated on their scenic impact on the Village and the complexity of the services attached to the poles. With our pole ranking in hand, we went to the BOS in October, 2018, to request a limited appropriation from existing design funds to have the various utilities provide a more detailed price for a significantly reduced scope — essentially the intersection at York Street and Long Sands Road. Our expectation, along with the views of the BOS, was that if the price for the work did not exceed $2 million, the Town might consider going to the voters for funding as part of an upcoming capital planning cycle. The utilities came back to the design team and DPW Director Lessard in March 2019 with surprising and disappointing results.

While the financial target under $2 million was achieved in the scaled down area, the results were not as expected. According to the drawings provided us by the design team (attached), taking away three undesirable existing poles, the utilities would be adding five in their place! This was shocking news for the committee members. DPW Director Lessard explained that in order to put lines underground, two new poles were needed at each end of the work area to run new lines below ground at one end and connect them back above ground at the other end. Each new pair of poles includes one for electric service and a second for cable and phone services. The fifth pole shown is necessary to support the special level of electric power on Hospital Drive. As a result, even though they can remove three existing poles in the center of the intersection, they must add five new poles in essentially the same area because of the small size of the priority target area. The drawings attached show the new poles drawn in red, side by side with existing poles. They also illustrate where extra equipment would be located at street level to support the underground lines. The extra equipment above ground would potentially interfere with the small space available in the project plan for the new monument plaza.

Because of the reduced area to be considered for underground utilities the additional poles wind up being more of a detriment to the final look of the Village rather than a gain. A broader area would have allowed those new

poles to be in less visible areas, but the committee acknowledged that the price would be so high that it did not seem feasible to enlarge the area. The group agreed that this situation is untenable and not anything we would recommend bringing to York voters.

Option 2. Install conduit throughout the project area while the Village streets are being reconstructed to create an option for the town to relocate utilities at a future date.

An idea initially considered feasible, was to install conduit for underground utilities in the project areas while major road reconstruction (i.e., deep digging) was taking place. The idea being it would save costs should the Town choose to invest in moving utilities underground at a later date. With further discussions about the likelihood of that happening and recognition that quick-changing technology may render the empty conduit obsolete such that it may never be utilized, we agreed this option should also be dismissed.

Our Recommendation Regarding Underground Utilities

With great regret, it is the recommendation of the Village Revitalization Steering Committee, that the Town not pursue underground utilities for the Village any further. In addition to the cost/benefit review of the reduced scope estimate, pursuing other options would potentially delay the start of the project. Consideration was given to moving above ground poles behind or between buildings in some locations to get lines out of sight or, at least, to be less obtrusive to the heart of the Village. This would require time to obtain easements from private land owners which could delay the final design and start date for the project as well as add to project costs.

We also took into account the increasing likelihood that the Town may decide to go to the voters for additional appropriation for the project itself. This might be the case if the State and Federal transportation funds yet to be allocated to York fail to materialize in a reasonable timeframe. An explanation of how transportation funds get allocated in our region is contained in our report to the Board in October 2018 (available on yorkvillage.org). Similarly, the Board is no doubt aware of instances in York and beyond, where bids are exceeding original cost estimates. Given the lag time between initial design estimates (2015) and the present, there is increasing likelihood that bids on the final design will turn out to be higher for the Village project than originally estimated ($4 million). This could be cause for the town to consider additional appropriation from York voters.

Where do we go from here?

The Village road and sidewalk improvements will require some of the existing utility poles be moved. New street lighting and trees as well as bike racks and other amenities will mean placement of poles need to be coordinated with the design team and the utilities. We recommend the York DPW make every effort to assure the utility companies take into account potential visual improvements that may be possible to achieve on the Town's behalf while working on the relocation of existing poles.

Ideas we hope the utility companies and Town can work together on include:

- Straighten existing poles that are leaning over York Street.
- Rework passage of lines currently over the Monument island so they are less intrusive on the new intersection and monument plaza.
- Review the locations and services of poles in front of First Parish Church and the Museum area to see if any line consolidations are possible or equipment alterations can be made.
- Consider increasing pole heights to reduce interference of utility lines within the visual line of sight from street level.

Respectfuly Submitted by Christine Hartwell, Chair

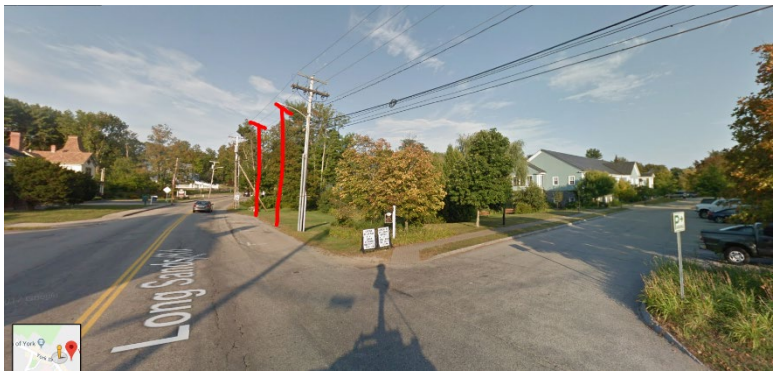
Attachments

- Option 1 target area drawings provided by the project design team based on utility company inputs.
- Utilities Section from October 2018 VRSC Report #1 to BOS.

Option 1 – Move Above Ground Utilities Underground in Priority 1 Project Area

Drawings Provided by Project Design Team Based on Utility Company Information

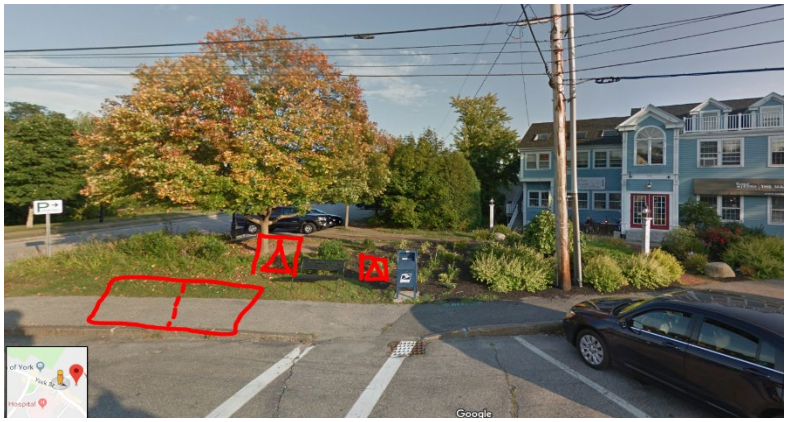
Library Riser Poles



Hospital Switch Cabinet and Riser

York Street Riser Poles

Pad Mounts and Reversible Switch Gear



Red lines show proposed new poles and equipment locations needed to move utilities underground in intersection in Option 1 (greatly reduced scope).

Extract from BOS Report #1, June 2018 pp5-7

Underground Utilities

Relocating utility lines underground in all or part of the project area would greatly enhance the appearance of the Village and has been recommended in multiple unfulfilled plans for York Village since the 1940's. The relocation of utility lines and elimination of poles in the Village project area was a notable feature of the Master Plan. Regrettably, the initial cost estimate for doing that was two times ($7.9 m) the estimate for the rest of the project ($4 m) and, therefore, was deemed unachievable. Underground utility project costs do not qualify for traditional Federal or State funding. Research by the committee could not find any source of outside funding. In addition, the utilities are not obligated to pay the cost of relocating existing utilities underground. The cost, therefore, of moving existing overhead utilities underground falls to the municipality requesting the work.

Two Options Under Consideration

In spite of the original estimate for moving all Village utilities underground, there continued to be support for something to be done about utilities in the Village. The design team has been asked to continue to explore the idea and seek information from the utility companies needed to develop more detailed costs to do the following:

1. Move current overhead utilities below ground in the right of way in a portion of the project area yet to be determined and retain existing overhead utilities elsewhere; and,
2. Install conduit throughout the project area while the Village project streets are being reconstructed thus, creating the option for the town to relocate utilities at a future date.

While only one of these two options will be chosen, it is important to develop costs for both.

Fig. 3: Comparison of Village Intersection with and without Overhead Utilities

Before: A preponderance of poles, wires and cables diminish the view at the York St/Long Sands Rd intersection.

Photo Credits: Marie Avoine
[More before/after photos on yorkvillage.org/ugu/]

After: Although facing a major redesign of the roadway, the photo above illustrates the potential for improvement in the scenic view as people approach the Village following removal of the overhead utilities in the intersection.

Based on preliminary data the utilities provided the consulting team early in the design work, DPW Director Lessard estimated a materials cost for conduit only of $126,000 per 1,000 feet. However, there will be a lot of additional costs involved in completing any sized installation. In order to get detail on material and installation costs, further engineering is needed and the utilities charge for that level of detail.

Extract from BOS Report #1, June 2018 pp5-7

The consulting team will be contacting the utility companies to confirm whether the costs they provided many months ago for engineering level estimates are still valid. Once we have a cost estimate for the utility engineering services, an action item can be presented to the BOS. The town must set up accounts with each utility company for them to do engineering work based on conditions specific to the York Village project. The committee has been told that it should be possible to develop an estimate for any given length of underground utilities because the utility companies will estimate the entire area of the project as we originally define it and their design estimates will be provided per linear foot of conduit or wire, manhole unit, square footage, etc. With that information, the project team can scale their estimates to a defined utility project area with a realistic price that may be sent to voters for funding.

Village Utility Pole Survey

At our February 2018 meeting, Planning Director Smith proposed that we undertake a site walk of the entire project area to help us define the boundaries of the area(s) within the overall project that, if money were no object, would ideally have utilities relocated underground. The walk was undertaken on a rather cold February day. Supplied with a map of numbered utility poles in the project area, six VRC members, Planning Director Smith, Selectmen Palmer and Estes, and Bike & Pedestrian Committee member Leah Drennan, walked the area and individually recorded a rating for each pole. Each pole was rated for the importance of its location and the pole's impact on scenic view and secondary ranking based on impact on plan design, signage, foliage, pedestrian flow, and cost. Two additional VRC members took the survey on their own prior to the next regular committee meeting.

At its March 15, 2018 meeting, the committee reviewed the results of the survey walk. The group had surveyed the area along Long Sands Road from Woodbridge Road to the Village center and along York Street from the First Parish cemetery entrance to Williams Avenue. The survey tally identified an area from the Town Hall entrance drive to the east side of the old church building and up Long Sands Road to the library driveway as having the highest priority for relocating utilities. (See Figure 4.)

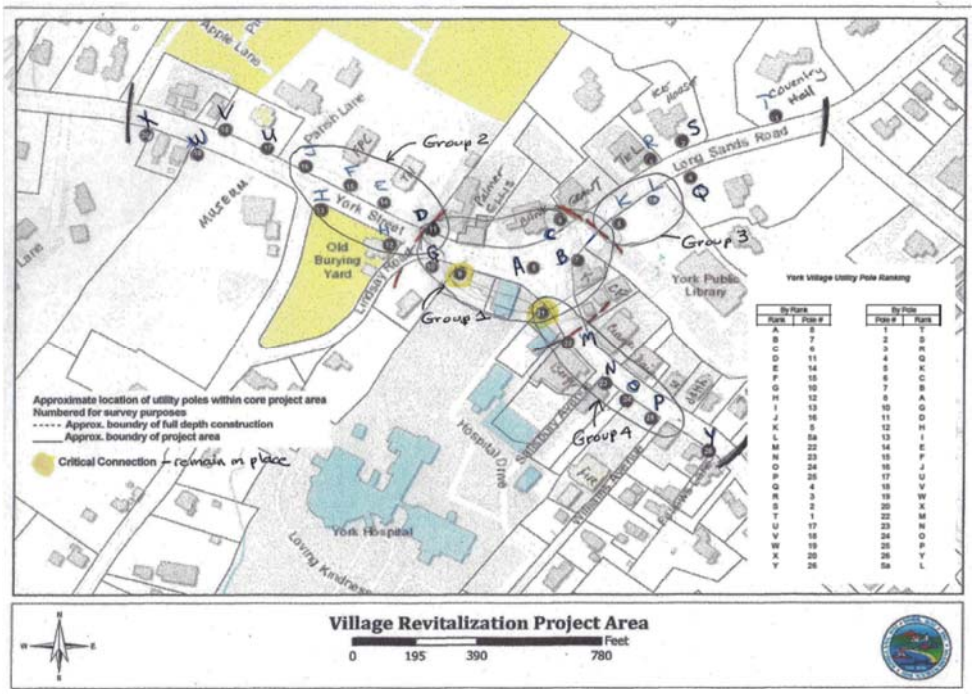


Fig. 4 Utility Pole Survey: Used to set priority areas for relocating existing overhead utilities underground.

To establish the priority areas, the committee assigned a letter to each power pole on the plan reflecting the priority for its removal based on our survey results and further discussion of each by the group. 'A' being the highest priority to 'Y' being the lowest priority. After completing that exercise, four groupings of poles were identified and prioritized. These have been sent to the consultants.

The group discussed various options and methods for removing or moving power poles along several segments of the roadway. The idea of moving power poles and lines behind buildings was discussed. That was ruled out

because of the complication of having to get easements from property owners and that doing so could require property owners to face associated costs and further delay the project.

If an underground utilities project is to be added to the revitalization project, the next available opportunity to obtain voter approval will be the May 2019 budget referendum. The project team needs to start working on capital planning issues and making progress soon to meet the lead-in timeline for that date.

Full BOS Report #1 is available on www.YorkVillage.org