

Frequently Asked Questions About 20A Undergrounding

Updated on June 17, 2014

I) General

Question	Answer
1. What are the advantages of 20A undergrounding?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetics. • Safety - reduce fire and seismic hazard. • Safety - from falling object. • Increase property values. • Reduce outage frequency during storms.
2. What are the disadvantages of 20A undergrounding?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The property title holders incur expenses for undergrounding facilities on their properties as well as underground street lighting system through a special assessment district. • Outages may be longer, because utilities are underground and cannot readily be seen.
3. What is 20A undergrounding of the utility lines and who pays for it?	<p>20A Undergrounding replaces all overhead lines with an underground system. It is paid with funds collected for undergrounding by PG&E from ratepayers in the utility's service area. Similarly, AT&T pays its cost out of funds it collected from ratepayers for undergrounding. The cable TV company (e.g. Comcast) pays its own costs as required by its Franchise Agreement with the City. Property title holders within the district pay the cost of the new or replacement streetlights via a special assessment district. The property title holders are responsible for all costs associated with their own panel conversion work less \$1,500 if authorized by Council to be paid with PG&E Rule 20A funds. Further, the property title holders are responsible for all costs associated with service lateral trenches less the cost of trenching up to 100 feet if authorized by Council to be paid with PG&E Rule 20A funds.</p>
4. How are the property title holders in the district impacted?	<p>The property title holders participate in the project by doing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vote to authorize Underground District creation. • Vote to authorize Special Assessment District creation. • Hire a contractor to upgrade or modify property to accept underground service. This is reimbursable by PG&E up to \$1,500 per property if authorized by Council. • Hire a contractor to install the service lateral on their properties. This is reimbursable by the utilities up to 100 feet per property if authorized by Council. • Coordinate cut-over with contractor and utilities. • Endure inconvenience of construction - noise, heavy equipment, dirt, dust, and traffic congestion.

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<p>5. What if I don't want to be part of the 20A undergrounding, but my neighbor does?</p>	<p><u>During the formation of the 20A Underground District</u>, every property title holder in the district can vote for or against the district creation. The district can be created by Council with a simple majority of the voting property title holders.</p> <p><u>During the formation of the Special Assessment District</u>, every property title holder in the district can vote for or against the creation of the special assessment district. The vote is weighted by the assessment value. The vote is technically called a "Majority Protest". If there is a majority protest – namely, the NO votes are greater than the YES votes, when weighted by the dollar value of the assessment - Council is not able to create an underground district. On the other hand, if there is not a majority protest, Council has the power to create the district, if it so chooses. A public hearing is required before Council establishes or creates a district. Citizens in the proposed district can attend the hearing and voice their opinions on the creation of the district. If the Council creates the special assessment district, all properties in the underground district are legally required to participate.</p>
<p>6. What is the difference between an underground district and an assessment district?</p>	<p>An underground district establishes the legal boundary of the streets and properties where the aerial utility lines will be undergrounded.</p> <p>An assessment district for undergrounding is a legislative act that obligates every property title holder within the underground district to pay for City cost of street lighting, administrative cost, project coordination, assessment district formation as well as City incurred cost of underground district formation.</p>
<p>7. What happens if the property title holder doesn't complete the panel conversion and service lateral trench in the allotted time?</p>	<p>If not completed within thirty days, the City will hire an electrical contractor to perform the necessary work on your property at your expense. A lien will be placed on your property to recover the City's cost, and this will be collected with the regular property taxes.</p>
<p>8. Will my street be completely resurfaced after undergrounding?</p>	<p>No. Unless your street is scheduled for resurfacing in the City's work plan.</p>
<p>9. Will sidewalks be replaced after undergrounding?</p>	<p>If excavation is parallel with gutter, and the width of the sidewalk is 6 feet or less, the entire length of excavation within the sidewalk area (traveled way) would be replaced. If sidewalk is greater than 6 feet wide, then only the portion of sidewalk from score line to score line would be replaced.</p>
<p>10. How long does construction take?</p>	<p>Construction takes about one year for each mile of undergrounding.</p>

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11. How long will the contractor be in front of my property?	Typically one day for major trenching. Otherwise, work is intermittent and access is provided for walkways and driveways.
12. Will trees be damaged by construction?	Contractors must comply with the City's Protected Tree Ordinance, and work with arborists to insure that trees and their roots are not damaged as a result of this project.
13. Do I need a permit for my electrical panel conversion work, and how much does it cost?	Yes, call the City's permit desk at (510) 238-4777 for specific information. Typically it is in the range of \$200 to \$300 depending upon the scope of work. The electrical contractor normally includes the permit fee in his estimate.
14. What is the 100-foot Rule, and how is it applied?	Typically the property title holders are required to install the service laterals (the underground conduits for electric, telephone, and cable TV, including trench excavation and backfill) on their properties at their expense. PG&E Rule 20A.3 permits the City to authorize that PG&E pay for the installation of no more than 100 feet of each customer's underground electric service lateral. The City will implement the 100-foot rule on each project as authorized by Council, and thus reduce the property title holder's expense. For service laterals exceeding 100 feet, the excess over 100 feet will be at property title holder's expense.
15. If my service lateral is 40 feet, am I given credit for the remaining 60 feet?	No.
16. Who will construct the service lateral on my property?	The property title holders will hire their own licensed electrical contractor to install service laterals in accordance with PG&E, AT&T, and cable TV (currently Comcast) company's requirements.
17. Where is the joint trench placed?	The joint trench is installed in the public right of way, which includes the paved road surface and some property on either side of the road. Typically the trench is installed on one side of the road to minimize traffic disruption and minimize cost.
18. When will I know where the joint trench will be?	After design is complete, Oakland Public Works will provide this information.
19. Where and when will construction start?	A large project is normally broken into phases. The City, together with the utility companies and Comcast, determines the starting location during design. Construction starts approximately thirty days after contract award.
20. What is installed in the service lateral trench on my property?	Three raceways (pipes), one for each utility: PG&E, AT&T, and Comcast.

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21. What happens if two existing utility services are already underground, but one utility is overhead (typically cable TV)?	The project will install the service lateral to underground the remaining utility that still has an overhead line (cable TV in this example). All utility services (electric, telephone, and TV) must be underground.
22. If my utility services are already underground, do I need to do anything?	Yes, you should still vote. If your street is in the underground district and has streetlights, you will be included in the assessment district.
23. If my utility services are already undergrounded, there are no streetlights on my block, and I don't want any, what do I need to do?	You need to submit a petition to the City, signed by the majority of property title holders on your street, requesting exclusion from the Underground District.
24. Does voting for the underground district commit me to an assessment?	No. Voting shows community support for Council to establish the underground district, assuming a majority of property title holders vote in favor. Then the assessment vote follows at some appropriate time after the establishment of the underground district.
25. Can my neighbor and I share the same joint trench for our service laterals?	Yes, but Oakland Public Works, Bureau of Infrastructure and Operations, Electrical Services Division recommends separate trenches. If a shared trench is necessary, adjacent property title holders should exchange easements to accommodate joint trench facility. These easements should be recorded. Such easements may be extinguished by foreclosures, but should assist in minimizing future disputes.

II) Utility Systems

Question	Answer
1. Will fiber optic cable be installed for high speed telecommunications?	This is up to the telecommunications utilities, and in accordance with their plans to implement fiber backbone in their service area. But the underground system is capable of accepting both copper wire and fiber optic cable.
2. How long will I be without electric power?	About two to four hours. PG&E will work closely with the residents and the contractor to coordinate the cutover and minimize power disruption.
3. Will excavation (digging) cause landslides?	The utilities are expected to protect against this issue through their design.

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III) Street Lighting

Question	Answer
1. Are new streetlights installed where existing streetlights are located?	Not necessarily. The City will redesign the streetlights for optimum distribution and will account for trees, driveways, bus stops, fire hydrants, etc.
2. Will I have input to their locations?	Yes, during design each resident is afforded the opportunity to discuss streetlight locations affecting their property.
3. Will streetlights be installed on my private property?	No. In the unlikely event that it is required, the City will request the property title holder to grant an easement for the streetlight. Without the easement, City cannot install streetlights on private property.
4. Will streetlights be installed on private driveways and streets?	No. If streetlights are desired on private driveways, the residents can contact PG&E to provide that service.
5. How are disputes regarding lighting levels and/or streetlight locations resolved between neighbors?	Street lighting levels are set in the Street Lighting Warrants. All deviations from this regulation must be approved and funded by Council. When a dispute on streetlight location occurs, the City asks the neighbors to work with their block captains to negotiate a compromise. If necessary, City staff (arborist and electrical engineer) can meet to explore options and assist in selecting the best alternative.
6. Which light fixture does the City recommend?	The City recommends the cobra head light fixture because of lower cost and better quality lighting. Ornamental light fixtures are available at a higher cost.
7. What light source is used in the fixtures?	A light emitting diode (LED) light source is used because it is the most energy efficient, and has the characteristic white color. The City has converted all its cobra head street lights to LED. And the City is in the process of converting its ornamental street lights to LED.
8. What wattages are the light fixtures? Are the ornamental and cobra head light fixtures the same wattage?	Typically 39 or 57 Watts LED in residential streets. The ornamental and cobra head light fixtures are the same wattage.

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9. Who pays for the streetlight maintenance and energy cost?	The energy charge is paid from the City's Landscaping and Lighting Assessment District (LLAD). The City provides funds for streetlight maintenance through LLAD during each budget cycle. There was no LLAD funding for OPW BIO Electrical Services maintenance in the Budget. If LLAD is not funded the Underground District will be assessed for the number of new lights that exceed the number of existing lights. The rate of assessment will be \$7,000 for each new streetlight up to and including 110 Watts LED, and \$9,000 for each new streetlight over 110 Watts LED. These amounts will be included in the special assessment district.
10. What are the advantages and disadvantages of cobra head LED light?	<p>The advantages are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better roadway lighting • Lower energy usage • Longer life cycle • Reduction in maintenance costs • Dark Sky Friendly <p>The disadvantages are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher mounting height (28-foot) • Galvanized steel pole and arm • Less attractive during daylight • May impede view
11. What are the advantages and disadvantages of ornamental light fixtures?	<p>The advantages are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Painted poles • Attractive during daylight • Lower mounting height (14-foot) <p>The disadvantages are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poorer roadway lighting • More Expensive • Impact views resulting from fixture glare
12. Why are streetlight foundations extended above grade?	In sloping conditions, concrete foundations extend above grade to keep soil and corrosion off pole. Pole height varies to maintain constant fixture mounting height.

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IV) Cost

Question	Answer
1. What expenses can I expect to incur as a result of this project?	You can expect to incur the special assessment district cost of \$15,000 per single-family dwelling. Property title holders must also pay for work on their own property as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your panel conversion cost averages \$3,500, less PG&E \$1,500 allowances, if authorized by Council. • Your service lateral cost averages \$100 per foot, less the PG&E portion for up to 100 feet, if authorized by Council.
2. Does PG&E pay for service upgrade?	No. This is a property title holder's expense if it is needed.
3. What does the panel conversion entail?	It consists of modifying your electric meter and service equipment to accept power from an underground source. This typically involves hiring an electrical contractor, but can be done by property title holder if qualified. A City permit and inspection are required.
4. Will City do panel conversion work for a property title holder?	Yes, if requested. But it will be at the property title holder's expense. In addition to the conversion cost, there is a charge of \$3,000 for administrative costs.
5. Why doesn't the City pay the cost of providing street lighting?	Because of financial constraints within the City, it is necessary to make those benefiting (property title holders) from the improvement (undergrounding) pay for it.
6. What costs do PG&E, AT&T and Comcast pay combined in 20A undergrounding?	PG&E, AT&T and Comcast combined cover the major portion (approximately 85%) of the cost of 20A undergrounding projects. Their combined portion typically is \$85,000 per property.

V) Assessment

1. Is the assessment tax and interest deductible?	The OPW BIO Electrical Services Division recommends you check with your tax advisor.
2. What does my assessment actually pay for?	The assessment pays for the new undergrounded street lighting system. It also pays for City administration cost, project coordination, and assessment district formation (bond counsel, engineer's report, reserve, and bond sale), and the City incurred cost of underground district formation.
3. For how many years can the assessment be financed?	It normally is 30 years. The City's Finance and Management Agency determines this at the time of assessment district creation, subject to existing market conditions.
4. What happens if I don't pay my assessment?	As part of your tax bill, if unpaid, it can lead to foreclosure by the County.

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5. I paid my assessment as a lump sum, but due to delay of the project can I get back my money?	No. A refund is not possible after a payment is made.
6. If I finance my assessment, can I pay it off at any time?	Yes, by contacting the Finance and Management Agency Treasury Division at (510) 238-3201 and asking for additional information.
7. Can the assessment be transferred with title change, or must I pay it off in full before selling my property?	The assessment can either be paid off or transferred, and is negotiable between buyer and seller.
8. Can the payment of the assessment be deferred until the property is sold or transferred?	No, it must be paid either initially as a lump sum by a given deadline, or annually with your property tax bill.