

Route 135 work won't be done by fall NStar is denied utility pole relocation in Natick for lack of paperwork

By Alison O'Leary Murray, Globe Correspondent | September 1, 2005

Natick officials have denied a request from NStar to move 10 utility poles, a decision that could deal a setback to a major roadway project downtown.

NStar's paperwork wasn't in order when it asked last week for permission to move the poles, the selectmen stated.

"This project has been going on a long time," Selectman John Ciccariello said at the meeting last week. "Why didn't they petition to move the poles before now? I don't see an excuse for it. They've had more than enough time, but historically their performance is lacking."

Town officials said they were denying the permit because they wanted the job done right, even though they had reservations about possibly delaying the project.

The poles need to be moved as part of the state's \$4.2 million Route 135 reconstruction, which has been inching through Natick since April 2004 and is now heading for downtown.

Project manager Steve Johanson of D&R General Contracting said the project is behind schedule and will not be finished this fall as originally planned.

Johanson said the selectmen's decision last week on the poles may hamper completion of the project near Union Street.

"We thought [NStar] was coming in this week. This will set us back, in reality, three to four weeks. We were planning to get those areas finished and paved before winter, and this means those sidewalks could be left incomplete, possibly for the winter."

NStar spokesman Michael Durand did not know how long it might take for the company to produce the paperwork the selectmen want. The company must specify the poles to be moved and where the new ones will go. The process is complicated because wires must be transferred from the old poles to new ones, and a number of utility companies are involved.

"It's unfortunate that town officials made this decision," Durand said. "At this point, we will work to make our submission [to selectmen] complete and take our cues from the town, so we may go forward as quickly as possible."

Late last month, town officials, a representative of the contractor, and members of Natick Center Associates, a business and community organization, met and decided to move the annual Natick Days festival, set for Sept. 10, from the town common to the high school because of the project.

It's not the first time that NStar's poles have caused a stir in town.

Robert Raich, a bus driver, made the number of unsightly double poles a central issue in his attempt to unseat incumbent Selectman Jay Ball during elections in 2003. Last year, Town Meeting voted to approve a bylaw requiring utilities to remove all double poles within 90 days of a new pole being installed -- and to remove all double poles in town within 90 days of the bylaw's approval.

Town Administrator Philip Lemnios said NStar still hasn't removed all the double poles, but it has removed a number of them, and the town isn't unhappy with the progress.

Lemnios attributed that in part to a business decision made by NStar to send contractors out to remove poles only when there is a whole day's work to be done.

He noted that there are typically five types of wires on utility poles -- Fire Department call box system wires, three communications company wires, and electric power wires.

"I think the utilities have felt the heat from Natick and other communities on this issue," Lemnios said. "But it's also a business decision on their part. This is not their highest priority."

Further complicating the road project, a group of residents has appealed Tree Warden John Cunniff's decision to allow removal of trees along the town common on South Main Street.

Heather Seiche and more than a dozen other residents signed a petition to appeal the removal of five of the trees, saying that a long-term plan for replacing them and ensuring the aesthetic quality of the town common should be worked out before they are removed.

Cunniff said last week that the trees would die if left in place because of planned sidewalk work around their roots.

The NStar pole removal request and the tree removal appeal, Lemnios said, are likely to be on the selectmen's agenda on Sept. 12.