

## Plan ahead with utilities; avoid costly construction delays

The utility business has changed a lot in the last few years, and that can play havoc with your street or highway construction project. There are more players — fibre optic and cable tv companies, pipeline owners, transmission companies that are separate from utilities — and they may be based out of state. They no longer stockpile materials but use just-in-time deliveries on cable, poles, towers, and the like. Delivery can take weeks or months. Currently it takes 18 weeks to get fibre optic cable.

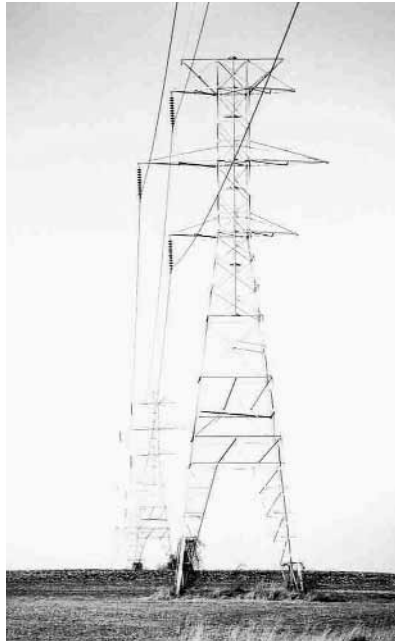
“It’s important to establish good communication with the utilities so they’re aware of what’s being planned,” says Ernie Peterson utility engineer for WisDOT. “We usually want them to move their facilities before we begin our work.”

The alternative can be construction chaos, expensive delays, and even law suits. One project had to be redesigned, while the contractor sat idle, because the utility wasn’t consulted in advance and could not move its facilities.

“We urge communities to have an Operational Planning Meeting early in the year and talk about what they’re planning for the next couple years,” says Ruth Alfaro, WisDOT District 1 utility coordinator.

Some county highway offices have begun organizing such meetings for January or February, inviting local community representatives to meet with utilities and discuss plans and logistics. “It can be very helpful just to hear about all the options,” says Alfaro.

For example, community leaders who want to bury transmission lines in downtown areas may not realize that it costs the utility \$1 million per mile, and it may cost each business up to \$200,000 to rebuild their individual connections.



Local projects often produce the most headaches, according to Ernie Peterson. The Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association is trying to get the word out on how important it is to coordinate early. “In the worst case, utilities are getting a call on Wednesday about a project starting the following Monday where they have to move a line of cable,” says Peterson.

Utilities would like to have finished plans for smaller projects at least six months ahead of time. They may need a year’s lead time or more for complex urban projects or moving large facilities. It is very important that the consultant or engineer not write bid specs without first consulting the utility.

Early discussions avoid unpleasant surprises. “We had a meeting for a highway exchange in Janesville, going into General Motors,” says Alfaro. “We discovered that there’s up to 16 buried lines, a huge fiber

optics cable, four different gas lines, a major pipeline, and electrical transmission and distribution. The City of Janesville had no idea there were so many utilities there. It’s going to be a huge utility move.”

Sometimes talking with utilities can even cut construction costs. If they’re planning to move or replace a facility anyway, local officials can adjust their street or highway construction plans so the utility’s restoration actually improves the road.

### What can a local community do?

- Encourage county or nearby city officials to host a utility coordination meeting, or organize one yourself and involve neighboring communities. Ernie Peterson is prepared to bring a team of utility representatives and contractors out to meetings around the state.
- Go to such a meeting, even if a road project is still at the “what if” stage. You will learn a lot.
- Use a utility coordination checklist like the one Peterson has prepared (available from the T.I.C.) to make sure that everyone involved in a project knows what needs to be done and who will do it.
- Call Diggers Hotline to locate utilities for planning purposes. They will respond in about three weeks and flag the locations.
- Plan ahead. Talk to the utilities early even though you don’t yet have the project in the budget.

*For help in planning a utility coordination meeting, contact Ernie Peterson at 608/266-3589, e-mail [ernest.peterson@dot.state.wi.us](mailto:ernest.peterson@dot.state.wi.us). For copies of the utility planning checklist, use the coupon on page 7 or call the T.I.C. at 800/442-4615, e-mail [tic@engr.wisc.edu](mailto:tic@engr.wisc.edu).*



*Utilities need to know about road construction projects six months or more before the start date.*