

**CITY OF ALBANY  
CITY COUNCIL AGENDA  
STAFF REPORT**

Agenda Date: December 7, 2009  
Reviewed by: BP

**SUBJECT:** Proposed Utility Undergrounding Project along Buchanan Street/Marin Avenue

**REPORT BY:** Ann Chaney, Community Development Director  
Randy Leptien, City Engineer

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**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

That the City Council direct the Traffic and Safety Commission and City staff to proceed in meeting with residents and property owners about the proposed creation of an Underground District along Buchanan Street/Marin Avenue between Cleveland and Masonic Avenues.

**BACKGROUND**

Rule 20 is a utility undergrounding program established by the California Public Utilities Commission that enables PG&E to recover costs from rates paid by its electric ratepayers for undergrounding projects. There is a surcharge on each PG&E bill that is applied toward undergrounding projects, which ratepayers have been paying for many years.

The concept of undergrounding the utilities on the north side of Buchanan Street has been discussed by staff and prior councils as a possible project for at least a decade. However, the timing for such a project is dependent upon accumulating sufficient Rule 20A “work credits” through PG&E, the project’s relative importance among other City priorities, and is most opportune when it can be combined or coordinated with other concurrent or projected City projects in the vicinity.

As of August 2009, Albany’s Rule 20 “Work Credit” balance totals \$2,381,220 (see attached PG&E letter). Because implementation of an undergrounding project could not start until two to three years from now, staff believes it is an appropriate time to begin PG&E’s process to get “into the queue” for an undergrounding project along Buchanan Street and Marin Avenue between Cleveland and Masonic Avenues. (Note: South side of Buchanan Street is already undergrounded.)

## **DISCUSSION**

To initiate an undergrounding project, the City Council must pass a resolution approving an Underground District. This will involve a noticed public hearing where property owners and residents may express their support or opposition to an Underground District. If approved, the resolution is then sent to PG&E and placed in the queue with other eligible Rule 20 projects. Staff estimates it will take at least two years, from the time the Council establishes the District, to start construction. PG&E will not move forward with any planning, financial or physical, without receipt of the City's signed resolution.

A map has been prepared by the City Engineer that delineates the proposed District boundaries (see attached map). It is recommended that staff, and the T&S Commission, begin holding meetings with residents and property owners to discuss the proposed project. The purpose of the meetings would be to describe the project, including benefits and temporary inconveniences, answer questions, and respond to concerns and suggestions. Property owners are responsible for the cost of reconnecting their electrical service to the new underground line. Albany may use its Rule 20 allocation to offset those costs up to a maximum of \$1,500 per service connection. Because the distance between the new underground line and buildings is relatively short, no direct cost to property owners is anticipated.

Once a resolution is approved by Council, staff will recommend that the City enter into a contract with Robert Gray & Associates (RGA) to prepare the street light design and utility composite design, and provide related consulting services. RGA is an engineering firm that specializes in complex utility undergrounding projects. Based on initial conversations with RGA, they estimate their cost would be about \$50,000, half of which is reimbursable from Rule 20 funds.

## **ANALYSIS**

Undergrounding overhead utilities improves the aesthetics and safety of a street. Buchanan Street has long been considered the next appropriate location for utility undergrounding. This is due to its status as the most prominent entryway into the City, its arterial street designation, its traffic volume, and the fact that the south side of Buchanan is already undergrounded.

The City Engineer also recommends that the undergrounding project be extended to include the area along Marin Avenue between Madison Street and Masonic Avenue, as well as Buchanan Street between Pierce Street and Cleveland Avenue. The reasoning for this recommendation is to take advantage of the major work planned as part of the Buchanan Street Bicycle/Pedestrian Path project. Because the bicycle path project is not yet funded, and will involve relocating the curbs between San Pablo and Cornell Avenues, it is possible that the two projects (undergrounding and path) can be jointly coordinated. A single project could reduce costs and ultimately reduce disruption to the neighborhood and motorists.

Due to the need of properly situating the end pole (referred to as a “riser” pole), the City Engineer recognized that Masonic Avenue was only a few blocks further. Because it appears that Rule 20 funds would be sufficient to extend it to Masonic Avenue, this segment is included on the attached map.

### **SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT**

Utility undergrounding has a number of benefits for a community including vehicular safety, beautification, and elimination of power line interference with trees. It will also improve visibility and accessibility for pedestrians and bicyclists.

### **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

It is estimated that the City Engineer’s costs during this current phase will be approximately \$10,000. This work will involve mapping adjustments, meeting with residents and property owners, and the Traffic and Safety Commission, and coordinating with PG&E staff. These costs are not reimbursable through Rule 20 monies.

If and when the Council approves the resolution to create the Underground District, staff would return to the Council and recommend that the City enter into a contract with Robert Gray and Associates. RGA estimates a contract cost totaling a little over \$50,000 to prepare the composite plan. About half of the RGA costs are reimbursable.

The source of funding for this work would be from Gas Tax monies.

### **Attachments**

PG&E letter dated August 19, 2009

Maps showing proposed Underground District boundaries