

Around the Commonwealth

Natick and Framingham

Towns approve home-rule petitions for double-pole removal

Natick and Framingham are looking to resolve the problem of doubled-up utility poles by asking the state to allow them to issue fines against utility companies that do not move poles or wires, install new poles, or remove disconnected wires or equipment within a certain time frame.

The request comes in the form of two home rule petitions that use similar language and were approved by each community's town meeting in October. The legislation would allow the towns to issue escalating fines against utility companies from \$250 per day up to \$1,000 per day for failure to complete work by specific deadlines.

Double poles are more than visual blight, said Natick Selectman Joshua Ostroff. When a utility does not act promptly to relocate poles and wires that affect a transportation or infrastructure project, taxpayers pay the price.

"This is a problem that undermines public confidence," Ostroff said. "Taxpayers see their tax dollars wasted because projects take forever. Ultimately it's state and local government that are blamed when projects extend unreasonably. So I think it's an accountability issue."



Natick and Framingham have filed home rule petitions that would allow the towns to fine utility companies for leaving double poles like this in place after a certain period of time.

Framingham Town Manager Bob Halpin said that in the past, disagreement among utilities over which company needed to move their wires first or who owned the pole led to stalemates and delays in moving wires or installing new poles.

Those kinds of disagreements are now addressed through the new National Joint Utilities Notification System, a database funded by Eversource, National Grid, Verizon and Unitil, and run by a nonprofit consortium.

The database creates a ticket for each double pole and tracks progress in transferring lines and equipment from old poles to new poles. NJUNS electronically notifies each utility company when its turn comes up to act.

"All utilities participate in the database," said Ostroff. "The problem is cities and towns have limited access to it ... so we don't know whether the information [in the database] is good or bad if we can't see it. Another thing that our bill mandates is full access."

Halpin added, "The database is worthless if five public utilities are pointing fingers at each other and they shirk the responsibility."

Gov. Charlie Baker's proposed "municipal modernization" bill (see related story, page 1) would allow cities and towns to enforce the statutory prohibition on keeping double poles up after 90 days, after passing a local ordinance authorizing them to do so

The governor's proposal is welcome, Ostroff said, but the home rule petitions go further by addressing the removal of disconnected equipment and the installation of new poles, and by mandating NJUNS access. Ostroff said cities and towns face difficulty in getting utility companies to set a new pole in conjunction with transportation projects such as widening sidewalks.

"Sometimes [the utility companies] drag their feet at the very beginning," he said. "That's what our bill is intending to address."

Halpin said municipalities need a way to assign responsibility and hold utilities responsible for inaction.

"You need a mechanism to systematically assign accountability and responsibility for moving these wires," he said. "That's the best aspect of this home rule petition."

The two bills (H. 3868 and 3886) have been assigned to the Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities and Energy. Ostroff and Halpin said they would share the language with other interested communities.