

Going Underground With Utility Lines

By JOYCE MCKENZIE of The Tampa Tribune

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TEMPLE TERRACE - The No. 1 request from communities looking to improve the aesthetics of their neighborhoods is to move overhead utility lines underground, says a Tampa architect.

"When we remove power poles, we have a lot less visual clutter, and it makes for a much more walkable street," David Conner told the Temple Terrace City Council last March 4.

Conner & Associates was hired earlier this year by the Temple Terrace City Council to do a feasibility study on the issue. On March 4, Conner presented his findings on the benefits of replacing aboveground power poles with underground trenches to encase the utility wires along the east side of 56th Street from 131st Avenue south to the Hillsborough River.

Conner said underground utilities also would "create an updated appearance consistent with [downtown redevelopment] and create a safer street with no guy wires or poles."

Joe Motta, the city's public works director, gave an estimated base cost of \$910,000 to relocate the area's overhead electrical and cable lines. "There also could be additional costs for the easements required to the south at the [BP] gas station and [Discount] Auto Parts store, as well as to the north at privately owned facilities," Motta said.

Ralph Bosek, the city's redevelopment director, said federal, state and local grants and a commitment of \$8,500 from Tampa Electric Co. will cover much of the project's expense. Applying for a Housing and Urban Development loan, he added, was also an option.

"It's the No. 1 thing that would kick-start the [redevelopment] project," he said.

Councilmen Ron Govin and Frank Chillura questioned how the loan would be repaid.

"Before you know it, we're going to raise our taxes by 1 mil or even more," Chillura said. "There are just a lot of unknown factors associated with it, and that's what I struggle with."

Councilman Ken Hallway and Councilwoman Alison Fernandez had similar concerns.

"We've only got so many pots to draw the money from. You've got to think these things through," Hallway said.

Fernandez said the city already has committed a lot of money and loans to the redevelopment project while facing a loss of revenue because of the Florida property tax amendment.

"I don't think I can support it," she said.

Govin suggested postponing a vote on the issue in order to allow time for the city council to research it. However, City Manager Kim Leinbach and Bosek concurred that the sooner a decision were made, the more rapidly the redevelopment project could proceed.

In a 3-2 vote, council members approved going forward with moving the aboveground utilities to underground on the east side of 56th Street from Busch Boulevard to the river.

Mark Knapp, Govin and Hallway voted in favor, and Chillura and Fernandez voted against it.

The work likely will begin in 2009, Motta said.