



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

Meeting Date: September 7, 2022

Agenda Item No: 5.2

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Project Location: Woods Cove Neighborhood

Case: Design Review 22-1404

Applicant: City of Laguna Beach, Public Works Department

Commissioners within a 500' Radius: None

Executive Summary: The Public Works Department requests approval of Design Review 22-1404 for the placement of aboveground utility structures associated with the proposed Woods Cove Underground Utility Assessment District (AD 2014-2). The design for removal of the overhead lines and poles requires new aboveground structures including riser poles, street lights, utility cabinets, pedestals, vent standpipes, and bollards. The following staff report provides an overview of the request with a recommendation to review the exhibits, consider public testimony, and grant an approval subject to conditions.

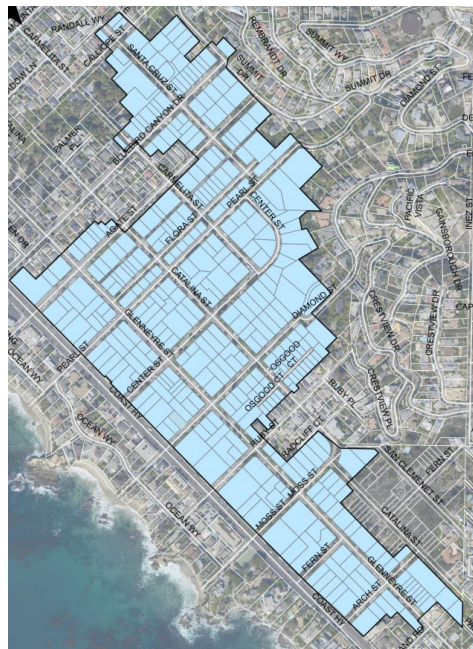


Figure 1. Project Boundary Exhibit

PROJECT SITE DESCRIPTION: The project is located in the Woods Cove neighborhood, generally bound by Bluebird Canyon Drive to the north, Upland Road to the south, Santa Cruz Street to the east, and South Coast Highway to the west.

BACKGROUND: In 2014, the City received petitions from property owners in the Woods Cove neighborhood requesting the formation of an assessment district to underground the overhead utilities and related poles. In 2019, by action of the City Council, the adjacent Agate/Glenneyre Assessment District was dissolved and incorporated into the Woods Cove district. A total of 391 parcels are located within the proposed boundary as shown on Figure 1. The overall project would remove approximately 130 utility poles and place approximately 15,000 linear feet of overhead utility lines underground. Removal of overhead utilities and poles requires the following aboveground equipment to be installed: riser poles, City-owned street lights, utility cabinets, pedestals, vent standpipes, and bollards.

STAFF ANALYSIS: Pursuant to Chapter 25.05.040 of the Laguna Beach Municipal Code (LBMC) – Design Review, all new aboveground utility structures are subject to design review. Proposed equipment such as electric transformers are placed in underground vaults unless the utility company determines that an underground facility is not feasible. As a result, proposed aboveground structures will be required to complete the proposed Woods Cove utility undergrounding project.

Woods Cove consists primarily of narrow roads without curb or gutter. To protect newly installed aboveground structures such as street lights and utility cabinets, new asphalt curb is proposed at various locations to reduce conflicts with vehicles. Where installing new curb is not feasible, bollards are proposed to protect the proposed utility structures. The proposed locations of aboveground structures have been determined by the utility companies based on utility design standards and engineering requirements. Proposed street lights are generally placed at the same locations as the existing street lights, which are currently mounted on wood utility poles proposed to be removed.

The City owns two parcels within the proposed district: 285 Agate Street (Fire Station No. 2) and 1500 Santa Cruz Street (Bluebird Park). Trenching is required at Bluebird Park requiring the City to grant easements to Southern California Edison (SCE) and Frontier Communications. Several additional easements are required from private property owners to complete the utility undergrounding work. Staff conducted field visits with parties impacted by the required utility easements and have tentative verbal agreements to provide the necessary easements.

Design Review Criteria

The proposed improvements are required to be designed in a manner which best satisfies the design review criteria specified within Laguna Beach Municipal Code (LBMC) Section 25.05.040(H). As evaluated in the proceeding pages, staff finds the proposal consistent with the below applicable design review criteria.

Access. *Conflicts between vehicles, pedestrians and other modes of transportation should be minimized by specifically providing for each applicable mode of transportation. Handicapped access shall be provided as required by applicable statutes.*

The project improves the access to properties within the proposed district for emergency responders and for the public during an evacuation by removing the potential of existing utility poles or overhead wires falling into the roadway due to vehicle-pole collisions or natural events such as earthquakes, winds, or fires.

Environmental Context. *Development should preserve and, where possible, enhance the city's scenic natural setting. Natural features, such as existing heritage trees, rock out-cropping, ridgelines and significant watercourses should be protected. Existing terrain should be utilized in the design and grading should be minimized.*

The project's setting will be improved with the removal of overhead utilities and related poles. Disruptions to existing vegetation are minimized because most trenching and excavations required for the project occur in the paved roadway. There are seven existing heritage trees within the district boundary. The proposed improvements will not impact these trees which will be preserved in place. There are several significant watercourses in this district. The utility undergrounding work will not impact these watercourses as work primarily occurs within the streets. The project crosses the Lower Bluebird drainage course at Bluebird Park. Trenching will be limited to the developed park area only and will not encroach into the natural creek.

General Plan Compliance. *The development shall comply with all applicable policies of the General Plan, including all of its elements, applicable specific plans, and the certified Local Coastal Program.*

The project complies with the following policies in the City's General Plan:

- Policy 4.8 in the "Landscape and Scenic Highways Element" to support utility undergrounding and aesthetic improvements throughout the City.
- Policy 12D in the "Transportation, Circulation and Growth Management Element" by encouraging property owners to form assessment districts for the undergrounding of utilities.
- Action S-1.11a in the "Safety Element" to encourage the undergrounding of utilities in existing developed areas.

Landscaping. *Landscaping shall be incorporated as an integrated part of the structure's design and relate harmoniously to neighborhood and community landscaping themes. View equity shall be an important consideration in the landscape design. The relevant landscaping guidelines contained in the city's "Landscape and Scenic Highways Resource Document" should be incorporated, as appropriate, in the design and planned maintenance of proposed landscaping.*

Landscaped and naturally vegetated areas will only be impacted to accommodate the installation of aboveground utility structures. The project does not propose any landscaping modifications beyond repairing or replacing landscape damaged by construction activities.

Lighting and Glare. *Adequate lighting for individual and public safety shall be provided in a manner which does not significantly impact neighboring properties. Reflective materials and appurtenances that cause glare or a negative visual impact (e.g., skylights, white rock roofs, high-gloss ceramic tile roofs, reflective glass, etc.) should be avoided or mitigated to a level of insignificance in those locations where those surfaces are visible from neighboring properties.*

Existing street lights in the district will be replaced with new ornamental LED street lights at similar locations to maintain sufficient lighting in the neighborhood. The proposed lights are consistent with the City of Laguna Beach Street Light standards and the Guidelines for Street Light Design. These approved streetlights point towards the ground and are outfitted with cut-off lenses to reduce glare and light intrusion to surrounding properties.

Pedestrian Orientation. *Commercial development design shall enhance and encourage pedestrian uses. Incorporation of articulated building masses, compact open spaces and courtyards, mixed use developments, use of landscaping as part of design, and orientation to pedestrian access should be maximized.*

The project will not negatively impact the current pedestrian orientation in the Woods Cove neighborhood. The removal of utility poles and overhead wires will improve the neighborhood aesthetics and enhance the pedestrian experience within the district boundary.

View Equity. *The development, including its landscaping, shall be designed to protect existing views from neighboring properties without denying the subject property the reasonable opportunity to develop as described and illustrated in the city's "Design Guidelines." The "Design Guidelines" are intended to balance preservation of views with the right to develop property.*

The project will not negatively impact views. The removal of the utility poles and overhead wires has the potential to improve views for the neighborhood.

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Determination

Pursuant to CEQA Guidelines, Section 15302 – Replacement or Reconstruction, staff recommends that the Planning Commission determine that the proposed project is exempt from CEQA under the Class 2 categorical exemption in that the existing overhead utilities would be replaced with an underground utility network with limited aboveground infrastructure, no expansion to capacity, and located in the same area. Furthermore, there is no evidence of any unusual environmental circumstances that might give rise to a reasonable possibility that the project will have a significant effect on the environment.

Coastal Development Permit (CDP) Determination

“Development” is broadly defined pursuant to LBMC Section 25.07.006(d) to include “*the placement or erection of any solid material or structure.*” A CDP is required for proposed development within the coastal zone unless specifically exempted or excluded by LBMC Sections 25.07.008 or 25.07.010, or is otherwise recognized as exempt by California Coastal Commission action. As described in the “Repair, Maintenance, and Utility Hook-Up Exclusions from Permit Requirements” adopted by the Coastal Commission on September 5, 1978, the proposed project to convert existing overhead utility facilities to a primarily underground network is exempt from CDP permitting provided no new roads are constructed, grading of an undisturbed area does not exceed 500 square feet, and no trees exceeding a 12-inch diameter at breast height are removed. Because the proposed project does not encompass any of the aforementioned activities, the project satisfies the criteria for exemption.

Public Notification

Public notice for the September 7, 2022 Planning Commission hearing was posted within the district boundary and sent by mail to surrounding property owners and tenants, the affected utilities, and others who have requested notification. Additionally, staff mailed letters on August 10, 2022 to all property owners within the district informing them that design review exhibits were posted on the

City website for review. These letters were also posted at street intersections within the district boundary. Lastly, the City requires that applicants take reasonable steps to contact neighbors prior to the design review hearing date to resolve potential issues prior to the initial hearing. Staff personally met with several property owners to coordinate potential construction challenges at certain properties and to communicate required utility easements encroaching upon private properties. Staff also met regularly with Woods Cove block captains throughout the design process to communicate ongoing efforts including City Council meetings to facilitate formation of the assessment district.

CONCLUSION: The proposed project improves the neighborhood's safety and aesthetics by undergrounding electrical and communication lines and utility poles. Aboveground structures are a necessary component of the project and staff has coordinated closely with the utility companies to locate the aboveground facilities in areas that blend with the existing environment to the extent feasible. Staff finds that the project is in compliance with the General Plan and applicable design review criteria.

RECOMMENDATION: Staff recommends that the Planning Commission approve Design Review 22-1404, subject to the discussion provided in the staff report and the findings and conditions in the attached Resolution.

ATTACHMENTS: Exhibit A: Application
Exhibit B: Design Review Exhibits
Resolution