

Patrick C. Lynch: Let's bury waterfront power lines

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BY PATRICK C. LYNCH

Remembering the challenges I faced when I was elected Rhode Island's attorney general in November 2002, I can appreciate the excitement and the stresses newly elected officials are feeling as they prepare to take office in January.

I write to urge them, particularly Governor-elect Gina Raimondo and Mayor-elect Jorge Elorza, to prioritize burying the high-voltage power lines on the Providence-East Providence waterfront. It's shameful that after 12 years this issue is still unresolved. The case for burial is stronger today than ever.

This project will greatly benefit both the economy and the environment of Rhode Island for many years to come — in fact, for many decades and generations. Burying these lines would:

- Boost economic development on our waterfront.
- Encourage tourism in an area that 10 million travelers pass by every year.
- Raise property values, especially for parcels primed for development with water views in East Providence and on Route 195 lands in Providence. This benefit is critical to growing the cities' tax bases.
- Provide jobs — nearly 300 good-paying jobs for every \$20 million spent on the project.
- Protect these wires from storms and floods, reducing the risk of outages that would disrupt electricity in thousands of homes in Rhode Island and Southeastern New England.
- Improve public health and safety by eliminating exposure of nearby residential development projects to electro-magnetic fields, which has been associated with childhood leukemia and other diseases.
- Enhance waterfront public spaces, particularly India Point Park in Providence, used by more than 100,000 people annually, and Bold Point Park in East Providence.
- Supplant antiquated towers, which National Grid proposes to replace anyway. The Seekonk River towers date from 1918. Let's rid both rivers of these unsightly intrusions, rather than replace them with unsightly new ones.

Other mid-size cities such as Chattanooga, Louisville and San Antonio have buried shoreline power lines and transformed industrial backwaters into marquee waterfront destinations. Providence has also done so by relocating utility lines under the bridges of our riverwalks and creating attractive public spaces that spawned WaterFire, which brings invaluable buzz and a million visitors a year who add \$70 million to the city's economy.

Burial will result in a dramatic, visible long-term upgrade for the waterfront that will cost a fraction of the \$1.4 billion in public funds that have already been spent there, including \$650 million to relocate Route 195 and \$580 million to reduce pollution in the Upper Bay.

Nearly \$18 million has been raised and designated over the last decade for the project. National Grid's preposterous latest cost estimate of \$33.9 million is properly still under review. Even assuming it is accurate (which is most certainly not the case), the average ratepayer in Providence and East Providence would be charged 44 cents a month for the

next 20 years to cover the projected shortfall. If absorbed statewide, the shortfall would cost the average ratepayer less than 10 cents a month.

National Grid has supported charging statewide ratepayers for relocation and burial projects that benefited wealthy home owners in East Greenwich, Fidelity Investments in Smithfield, and the Route 195 lands in downtown Providence. But it has opposed statewide payment on this project, repeatedly raised its cost estimate for burial, and taken no initiative to get it done, after having been “authorized to proceed” with the project by state law passed more than six years ago.

More than 1,900 people from all 39 Rhode Island cities and towns — half of them residing outside Providence and East Providence — have signed the petition for burial at www.friendsofindiapointpark.org. More than 50 political, civic, educational, professional, business and labor organizations and leaders support burial — including the current and previous governors, state attorneys general, and Providence mayors; the Rhode Island General Assembly and Providence and East Providence city councils; the Rhode Island Building Trades Council; half a dozen developers and business groups in the waterfront area; The Providence Journal (which has published six editorials on the subject); and the presidents of Brown, the Rhode Island School of Design, and Johnson & Wales, who have written a joint letter of support three times in 11 years.

Burying these wires is closer than ever. What has been lacking is the commitment of National Grid to get it done. After more than a decade of broad public support, the time has come for action. Governor-elect Raimondo and Mayor-elect Elorza have the opportunity to turn the unfinished project they inherited into a proud legacy that will benefit the state for generations.

Patrick C. Lynch was Rhode Island attorney general from 2003 to 2011.