

UNDERGROUND POWER LINES A QUESTION AFTER DECEMBER ICE STORM

An immense old oak tree crushed Kaye Parsons' garage roof during December's record-breaking ice storm in Eugene that knocked out power to thousands.

Parsons can show you the enormous tilted stump of the tree, which also smashed through her wood fence on a hilly part of West 29th Avenue in the Friendly Street neighborhood. Piles of chopped branches from hundreds of fallen trees are stacked in many front yards of this venerable Eugene neighborhood.

"It's an old neighborhood so the properties are bigger and the trees are bigger," Parsons tells *EW* in a Jan. 2 interview at her house. Her older neighborhood also features mostly overhead power lines, like many other such neighborhoods in Eugene.

Areas like this saw the most damage and power outages during December's ice storm because there are so many overhead power lines and so many aging trees planted.

The city of Eugene changed city code several decades ago to require all new subdivisions to use underground power lines, but powerful ice storms like the one last month continue to cause monstrous damage because of Eugene's many trees and the existing overhead power lines already in place.

So, why not just put more power lines underground?

It's complicated, says Eugene Water and Electric Board (EWEB) spokesperson Joe Harwood. Each year, EWEB crews install \$200,000 to \$400,000 of new underground power lines throughout Eugene, at a cost of about \$150 a foot for a smaller line and \$500 a foot for a larger transmission line.

"Several hundred thousand dollars doesn't go very far when you are talking a minimum of \$150 a foot," Harwood says.

The city already has 552 circuit miles of underground lines running under it, and 3.5 miles of underground transmission lines (most of downtown uses underground lines thanks to urban renewal funding). Conversely, there are 160 miles of overhead transmission lines and 563 miles of overhead lines throughout Eugene.

Parsons' house, which lost power in the storm, sits on a hillier section of West 29th Avenue. Her living room view is eye-level with a towering handful of pine trees and a big telephone line that runs through the alley.

"In this old neighborhood, it wouldn't be feasible to bury it," says Stan Parsons, Kaye's husband. Changing an overhead line to an underground line requires working with private landowners and digging around old sewer and water lines, to name only a few of the obstacles, Harwood says.

Additionally, city crews must get rights-of-way passed and an even simpler problem — big rocks under the soil

— may also block an underground line from completion, Harwood says.

After lines are buried, another problem could arise if homeowners accidentally dig into lines before checking with EWEB about possible buried utilities.

"We had one mile of downed overhead lines in the Saratoga and East 53rd area a couple weeks ago," Harwood says, referring to the December ice storm. "If we moved all that underground, we'd have to go under the backyards of all these people."

Broken limbs and shattered trunks still line miles of Eugene streets. Crews were able to clear fallen trees from roadways during the storm, but many trees have lain untouched at the roadside since.

Neighborhoods hit hardest by the storm include the South Hills, Southwest Eugene, the Ferry Street Bridge neighborhood and College Hill.

Harwood says the storm left EWEB with about \$4.2 million in damages, which it hopes can be partially reimbursed through emergency funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

EWEB will be holding a public information meeting 5 to 7 pm Monday, Jan. 9, at the EWEB building.

"We want to explain what happened and how we approach restoration," Harwood says. ■



PHOTO BY MIKE SHEAHAN

SLANT

- Eugene got a windfall of sorts with a nearly \$19 million Comcast payment from a fee for broadband services. Take \$8.7 million of that payment and put it **towards a new City Hall** and suddenly the Eugene City Council has \$27.45 million to play around with. Woohoo! Or wait, not so fast. The citizens of Eugene have a long history of not wanting to spend a bunch of cash on City Hall, and the city has a long history of making rash decisions about City Hall. More urgently than a fancy city hall, what this area needs is a good homeless shelter. Not a rest stop for the night, but a shelter where people can go day or night

and something that will take the burden off of the volunteers of the Egan Warming Center and other service providers to the unhoused. Let's talk. Can we do some good planning and get an affordable City Hall *and* help those in need?

- **Mayor Lucy Vinis** told us recently that she is eager to move past "mayor-elect" and dive into the job she won in the November election and the May primary. Although Vinis will earn only about \$20,000 a year, she will have considerable power to bring factions together, set the agenda, craft the directions Eugene will go and build trust between the people and their local government. Kitty Piercy worked incredibly hard at this job and we are grateful. All indications are that Mayor Vinis will do the same.

- Alice Doyle of Log House Plants and the Cottage Grove Blackberry Pie Society brings us the bumper sticker of the week: "**Bring Back Facts.**" It may be a little late for this one, but we'll keep on trying. Get involved at blackberrypiesociety.org.

- *EW*'s Corinne Boyer has received the **2017 Tom Parker Award for Excellence in Media** from Lines for Life, an Oregon-based nonprofit fighting substance abuse and suicide, for her July 26, 2016, story "Overprescribed Opiates: The rise of heroin addiction and the effort to end overdose deaths." Lines for Life, whose work appears in the story, writes, "in particular, we appreciated your comprehensive view of addiction, treatment and the complicated nuances of public policy and prevention."