

Mayor Kate,

June 18, 2023

Members of the San Rafael City Council

I wish to recommend and support the resolution designating San Rafael Street between Medway Road and Spinnaker Point Road an underground utility district. This has been a longtime personal ambition of mine since the days when then Councilmember and friend Cyr Miller and I walked the street noting things like the sidewalk obstructions posed by utility poles and other things.

Undergrounding utilities has many benefits including greatly improving the aesthetic appeal of a streetscape, improving pedestrian use of sidewalks, improved public safety by eliminating damage due to weather, traffic accidents, or vandalism.

A personal example of the aesthetic issue was brought home to me in 1999 when my in-laws, natives of the Czech Republic in their early 70's, visited us in San Rafael for the first time. Products of the depression they had spent their entire lives in the Eastern industrial city of Ostrava, roughly akin to our Detroit. They had never traveled outside of the Czech Republic. My father-in-law was amazed at the overhead utilities on Canal Street and I spent a considerable time explaining the purpose of each of the wires and devices. All of their utilities have been underground for decades.

### **Why Underground ?**

The first reason that usually comes to mind is aesthetics. Utility poles and overhead wiring are unsightly. Canal Street may not be as bad as it can get in some places...



...but neither is it clear sky space. Many neighborhoods in San Rafael enjoy pole free streets, including the immediately adjacent Spinnaker Point development. Is the Canal neighborhood less worthy? Of course not. The Canal neighborhood is arguably San Rafael's most densely

populated neighborhood so the tangled skies impact a disproportionate percentage of our citizens.

But aesthetics is only one reason. Another has to do safety, in particular pedestrian safety. Because the Canal neighborhood harbors a very high-density population, including many families with children, the demand for recreation space is great. Fortunately, the Pickleweed Community Center, located at the eastern end of the proposed undergrounding district, provides substantial attractive recreation space and is heavily used. Also located at the eastern end of the proposed undergrounding district is the Bahia Vista Elementary School, a principal gathering place for small children and some parents five days a week. Add to those two facilities the fact that a majority of the Canal neighborhood residents are lower income families many of whom do not have cars. The direct impact is that Canal Street, particularly between Medway and Spinnaker Point probably has the highest pedestrian usage of any similar roadway in San Rafael. It is very common to see children with or without a parent walking to or from school, or to Pickleweed Park. It is very common to see mothers pushing strollers along the sidewalks, where it's possible to do so.

I added that last because it is not possible to push a stroller, or market basket, or similar the length of the proposed project area because of sidewalk obstructions, most often utility poles. It is also not possible for a wheelchair to pass.

### **What about Canal Street Sidewalks?**

The answer to the above is that Canal Street sidewalks are a mess. The city recently contracted to have many irregularities, places where sections of the sidewalk had settled or shifted in ways that presented tripping hazards ground even. A band-aid at best. In any case that only deals with one of the problems. Another, and greater, problem is simply the width of the sidewalks as built.

If you were to ask most people what part of the street does the city own, they would tell you from the face of the curb on one side to the face of the curb on the other. A few might broaden that to say that the city owns that plus the sidewalk and after that it's private property. While that might be true in some places, it's not true along most of Canal Street. In fact, along most if not all of the proposed project area the city franchise extends 10'6" from the face of the curb. Common sidewalk width is 4' so that means the city actually owns an additional 6' of what many think is private property.



This photo illustrates the point. The striped pole is at the eastern property line corner of my property at [REDACTED]

In this photo the sidewalk is 4' wide (plus 6" at the top of the curb), unobstructed, and in good shape. But I offer that this is the exception rather than the rule.



This photo shows a condition at one section of Pickleweed Park. The marks on the story pole are 1' intervals. So, we can see that the sidewalk including curb is 5' wide but only 3' are usable without walking off the sidewalk on the dirt. This is an all-too-common condition.



And utility poles are not the only offenders. Most of you will understand that I have a particular affection for fire hydrants. But I can tell you true that I have banged a leg into the protruding part of this one more than once. And in this case, we have the property owner's vegetation also encroaching on the sidewalk resulting in a path only 2' wide.



Even the USPS gets in the act. Not the property owner's landscaping also encroaching.



Same property just

further west, encroaching landscaping.

These examples were photographed absent people for the most part out of concern for personal privacy. But the sidewalks are not used that way. Sure, sometimes there is a single pedestrian who is easily able to navigate even the narrow sections. Most cases involve more than a solo person. More typically you see groups of 2 or more, my wife and I on our way to a Friday night dinner at Celia's. Sometimes it's us and our neighbors with their 10-year-old. It can be difficult at best and impossible in many cases for 2 people to walk side-by-side for any distance even assuming that you're not encountering people coming in the opposite direction.

So, what can be done about this? Clearly given the use that these walkways get on a daily basis Canal Street should offer a safer path for pedestrians. And it does in some places.



Clearly this is a much better walking path on Canal Street. The difference? At this apartment building the owner has not extended onto the city franchise area and has instead kept improvements entirely on private property.



Different property but same result.

Here are examples of where the city could greatly improve Canal Street pedestrian safety by simply exercising the right to use the public franchise for public purpose.



I've talked primarily about sidewalks because I've witnessed way too many cases of women with strollers taking to the street in traffic to get around obstructions. The same with children

on bicycles or just pedestrians needing to take to the street when passing opposing walkers. I saw a near mis when someone waling ahead of me stepped into the street at a bus stop to allow others to pass just as a bus approached from behind. In my view many of these conditions are simply open liabilities for which the City of San Rafael could be held responsible. If there haven't been sufficient opportunities to improve the Canal Street walkways for public safety the undergrounding project should be an incentive.



I understand that Rule 20A work credits may not be used for work beyond the actual undergrounding. Things like curb-to-curb repaving are not allowed to be funded with Rule 20A funds. However, this project presents a unique opportunity, one in which a result can be had that is greater than just the sum of the parts. Creating the undergrounding district as contemplated here with funding already in place is obviously the right choice. But, please keep in mind that this is one of those circumstances when the right forward thinking should be exploited to the maximum benefit of the community.



I urge the Council to designate Canal Street as an undergrounding district as proposed to start the process toward this community benefit, but to also be thinking ahead to the unique opportunity for improvement above and beyond what Rule 20A will provide.

**A word on the photos.**

These were all taken on the afternoon of June 11, 2023. The red and white story pole markings are at 1-foot intervals to make gaging distances easy. All of these photos plus many more, about 60 data points in all are posted on an interactive web page at: <http://www.luckham.com/Sidewalk%20Photos%202023-06-11/album/index.html> Each photo is plotted to the exact location on Google maps and the location will be shown if you click on the “Map” symbol at the bottom of the page. For some reason there’s a pop up that says Google can’t display the map correctly. Click that to make it go away. The mapping is working correctly. Sorry, done in haste. The upper left-hand corner will show the closest property address.

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