

## Underground Utilities

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Village of Cobleskill

The Village of Cobleskill has two major construction projects completed during the 2004 calendar year. The first being the installation of 1,200 feet of eight inch water main and a second project, 1,079 feet of eight inch sewer main replacement. Before the start up of each project, the contractor calls UFPO to get the existing underground utilities located. This means for the Cobleskill Water Department, tracking and marking out  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile of transmission mains and approximately 80 service lines.

I had observed a trend in a practice that contractors are employing during the construction phase in regards to the location of these existing underground water mains and service lines. This being, legally holding the municipality responsible for any broken lines that are slightly off the mark, abandoned, or mismarked. Used to be you worked together to repair a damaged utility. Not any more!

In the State of New York Department of Public Service 16 NYCRR Part 753 Protection of Underground Facilities 753-3.6d states: Where center line stakes or marks indicate the size of the underground facility, such facility shall be assumed to lie within a strip of land equal to the width of the facility plus four feet with the center line of such strip of land at the stakes or marks. Okay, so my interpretation of this statement would be, that where the blue paint mark on the ground is, the contractor can expect to find the water line on either side of that mark up to two feet away.

The sewer main contractor was observed on many occasions to be still digging with the backhoe bucket within six inches of the mark indicating the location of the water line. When questioned about this practice the contractor referred to the blue mark as being the actual location of the water main. Needless to say in an eight week project the Water Department was called six times to come and shut off the water to the street due to hit and broken lines, with one being a boil water notice to the entire Village.

I tracked down a former employee of the construction firm and asked "What's up with them breaking so many water lines?" His reply was, "this company feels it's faster to use the backhoe bucket, break and fix a water line than it is to hand dig around the utilities".

Please bear in mind that this statement didn't come from any of the present construction workers and I don't know the facts related to this gentleman leaving their employment. If this is true, then I see the contractor has no regards at all for the inconvenience to the public or utility.

Cobleskill has a water system dating back to 1886. Many of the old lead service lines to the houses had been replaced with new copper lines, most were abandoned at the curb stops, the lines were still booked to the water mains and

charged under the roads. As the contractors came across these unknown lines and broke them, the Village was billed for the contractors labor and provided the repair parts. If a line location was off the mark quite a bit, or not marked at all, the contractor held the municipality responsible for his cost to repair this line charging the Village an hourly rate for each one of his employees on the job site plus an equipment charge for trucks, backhoe, etc.

Pipe location is not an exact science, as many people know. Different types of soils, electrical currents in the ground, and other buried lines can all help to throw off your locator's signal. At a pre-construction meeting, I do state a disclaimer to this effect. If things continue on this path, I foresee a day in the not-to-distant future where contractors and municipalities will be in court to decide who pays for extra repairs after a construction project has been completed.

It would be of my opinion that the owner of the utilities should be held harmless against damage to underground lines during construction. Maybe it should be written into the bid specs that the contractor is responsible for locating all existing utilities within the job site? That missed marked lines are a part of the job? Maybe I'm reaching a bit on this one? Anyway, I see a disturbing trend emerging and is it time to get an official ruling for this issue? ♠