Utility Relocation

What is it?

Utility lines, poles, and guy wires contribute to the visual clutter along many roadway corridors. The appearance of these roadway corridors can be substantially improved by relocating the overhead utilities out of view.

Options for Relocating Utilities

There are two options for relocating utilities:

- Relocate lines back off of the main roadway, to a parallel alley, dedicated utility (easement) corridor, or less-used street.

- Bury the lines within the roadway corridor. It is typically 15 to 20 times more expensive to bury utilities than to relocate them above ground out of view, but one benefit of burying the utilities is that they are less vulnerable to damage during a storm, causing fewer outages.

Work with utility providers as early as possible. Through regular dialog with the utility providers you may find that planned upgrades are in a utility’s capital improvements plan, allowing you to coordinate some corridor improvements with planned utilities work. Sometimes, utility providers may be able to relocate their overhead utilities prior to your construction work. This avoids the difficulties of having utility crews on-site when construction begins, and construction can occur in a shorter time period, usually saving both time and money.

How to do it

1. Prioritize utility relocations. Your corridor study (refer to GQGP quality growth tool: Corridor Study) should identify areas where utility relocation is needed along the corridor. Before approaching the utility companies about relocation possibilities (next step), it is advisable to prioritize the needed relocations based on where overhead utilities are most unattractive and relocating these utilities will therefore have the most impact. This prioritization will put you in position to negotiate a phased strategy for utility relocation with the providers, so that costs are spread over time to accommodate budget constraints.

2. Meet with utility providers. Present your desired utility relocations and discuss possibilities for coordinating efforts between your local government and the providers. You may find that utility providers may be able to relocate their overhead utilities as part of planned upgrades already in a utility’s capital improvements plan. Ask questions like:
   - What are the options for relocating this utility so that it is not visible from the corridor?
What are the costs associated with relocation?
Can you cover costs as a contribution to the public interest?
What can our local government do to defray relocation costs (acquire easements, etc.)?

3. **Develop a relocation plan.** Based on the discussions with utility providers and available funding, develop a long-term plan for relocating the utility lines. Make sure to clearly delineate responsibilities between the utility providers and your local government (who is paying for the work, who is overseeing the work, etc.). Also, clearly spell out time-frames when various aspects of the project will be completed. The final plan should be approved by your local government and each affected utility provider.

4. **Implement utility relocations.** Follow your relocation plan and maintain ongoing coordination with utility providers during construction -- regardless of who is actually moving the utility lines -- to ensure that the relocation process moves along as smoothly as possible.

**Things to consider before using this tool**

- Service disruptions, road and/or sidewalk closures are likely to be a necessary part of the utility relocation process. Plan these to minimize inconvenience to users (during weekends, nighttime, etc.) and ensure that no special events are planned along the corridor during times of disruption. Provide adequate notice of disruptions to affected businesses and residents.
Additional Information on Improving Strip Commercial Corridors

Background

- Does your community have roadways that are rather unattractive due to cluttered commercial development and excessive signage?
- Have some of your roadways become congested and dangerous due to the character of development along the road?
- Are some of your once-thriving commercial strip corridors declining as businesses move on to newer areas?
- Does your community have commercial areas that are not very accessible for pedestrians, bicyclists, or transit riders?

Many communities in Georgia have grown in ways that have left major roadways in disarray. A typical example is a five-lane road with a variety of roadside uses, numerous overhead utilities, commercial strip centers, a clutter of signs (varying in size and style), and little to no accommodation for walkers and bicyclists. These strip corridors typically exhibit the following characteristics:

- “Seas” of parking that degrade the looks and function of the corridor
- Traffic congestion or speeding through the corridor
- Inconsistent or poor street and pedestrian lighting
- Advertisements, road signs or pavement markings that clutter the roadway with an inconsistent look
- Lack of architectural or landscape continuity
- No speed restraints to slow motorists in places where you might want to encourage more pedestrian use
- Uncontrolled driveway cuts and inconsistent sidewalk placement and condition, which limit walking and bicycling

Before Embarking on A Corridor Improvement Strategy

Technical Assistance Needs

For most corridor improvement projects, you need the expertise of a design team. Whether in-house, hired consultants or a combination, the team should work closely with local planning staff, stakeholders, utility providers, the district engineer for the Georgia Department of Transportation, and other groups that may play a role within the corridor. The design team should be selected based on qualifications that include:

1. Experience with other corridors of similar land uses and size, including demonstrated understanding of local development styles that need to be preserved
2. Abilities in: project management, traffic operations, civil engineering/road design, utility design/coordination, land use planning, landscape architecture, urban design, and architecture.

3. Having a creative and communicative project manager and key personnel available to interact frequently with and effectively present alternatives to planning staff and stakeholders.

4. Experience conducting community involvement workshops, opinion surveys, and stakeholder meetings. Experience using computer imaging or other techniques to present alternatives is also helpful.

5. Creativity in developing new approaches and ideas to improve a corridor.

Relative Costs and Funding
Most of the early costs will be related to design team fees and expenses, but the majority of the total expenses will occur during construction. The following table provides a common range of costs for the various approaches and phases:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Typical Cost Range</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corridor Study</td>
<td>$15,000-$100,000 depending on length</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of Improvements</td>
<td>7-9% of construction costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction of Above Grade Improvements</td>
<td>$400-1,750 per linear foot of roadway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utility Relocation/Below Grade Improvements</td>
<td>Varies - dialogue with utility provider is key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare Overlay District Ordinance</td>
<td>$15,000 - $50,000 plus local attorney fees depending on size of area and amount of consensus building sessions with stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare Sign Ordinance</td>
<td>$5,000 - $20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Development Templates</td>
<td>$10,000 - $25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-Street Traffic Improvements</td>
<td>$5,000 and up for each improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redeveloping Property within Targeted Corridors</td>
<td>Typical construction costs by local contractors for renovation work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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An important thing to remember is that your entire project does not need to be implemented at once. Phasing activities allows for better budgeting and time to check into additional funding sources.

1. Funding may come from your general revenues, special purpose local option sales tax, development authority financing, State, and Federal grants.

2. The merchants and interested committee members may be interested in working together to raise money to fund project activities.

3. GDOT has an extensive program to fund qualifying local improvements through the TEA (Transportation Equity Act) program. Local matches (20%) can provide the early planning and design, while GDOT reimburses the
remainder of the design and the construction of improvements. Applications for TEA funding may be submitted every two years, beginning in January.

4. Another option is to form a Community Improvement District, wherein an additional property tax levy is used to fund improvements to the streets, sidewalks, and other surrounding facilities.

**Political Considerations**

Improving commercial strip corridors may sound on the surface like a no-lose situation: the appearance of the corridor is improved, more customers will visit merchants, blighted buildings will be renovated or removed -- everyone will seemingly benefit. Unfortunately, the reality is that many well-planned projects are never implemented, and political challenges are one of the most common reasons. The typical sources of controversy might include:

1. Perception that too much money is being spent for "appearances," at the expense of more important needs.

2. Perception by major business owners that the improvements will have greater harm than benefit to their businesses.

It is important to work towards a consensus of the stakeholders and elected officials on needed corridor improvements. You can avoid political pitfalls if you have a well-established advisory/stakeholder group, and work diligently to keep local elected officials well informed about the project.

**Legal Considerations**

The primary legal questions focus on right-of-way and infringement on private property. Here are two important points to remember:

1. GDOT owns right-of-way along all corridors that are on the state road system. No construction, landscaping, or other use is permitted inside the right-of-way as a general rule. Any creative use of the right-of-way, such as landscaping improvements, would require close involvement by GDOT and prior approval.

2. Cities and counties have condemnation powers, but their actual use for corridor enhancements must be carefully justified, because these projects may be viewed as being more for beautification than for improving the general health, safety, and welfare of the community.

**Know your goals**

Your project goals should be clearly developed then communicated to affected parties. Be sure to make it clear that the project is intended to make your street environment a distinctive "place," not merely a generic strip commercial roadway. It is important to keep the improvement project moving, once underway. Loss of momentum and support will occur if immediate improvements are not visible, or the project is perceived as moving along erratically, with lots of starts and stops.