



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO

LAND USE AGENDA ITEM

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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Fifth District

DATE: May 7, 2025, and May 21, 2025

05

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

ADOPT A RESOLUTION AND ORDINANCE FOR THE FORMATION OF THE UNDERGROUND UTILITY DISTRICT (UUD) FOR BONITA ROAD PHASE 4 IN THE COMMUNITY OF SWEETWATER AND RELATED CEQA FINDING (5/7/25 – FIRST READING; 05/21/25 – SECOND READING AND ADOPTION) (DISTRICT: 1)

OVERVIEW

The County of San Diego's (County) Department of Public Works (DPW) has worked with utility companies, including San Diego Gas and Electric (SDG&E), for over 50 years to enhance community aesthetics, improve public safety, and increase utility reliability through utility undergrounding. In 1967, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) established the Electric Tariff Rule 20A Program (20A Program), which requires investor-owned utilities to set aside funds in the form of credits to underground their utility lines in areas that meet specific public interest criteria, such as major thoroughfares, scenic corridors, and locations with significant public benefit. In response to the 20A Program, the Board of Supervisors (Board) established Board Policy J-17 (J-17) Undergrounding of Existing Overhead Utility Facilities in 1970. The policy outlines the process for managing undergrounding projects and establishing an Underground Utilities Advisory Committee (UUAC). The UUAC includes DPW staff and representatives from SDG&E, AT&T, and other telecommunication companies. The UUAC reviews projects that meet the criteria for undergrounding, coordinates plans and construction of these projects and develops a long-range plan for undergrounding in the unincorporated area.

After the UUAC has recommended a project, the next step is to form an Underground Utility District (UUD). A UUD is a designated area created by ordinance that requires all current and future utility facilities to be located underground. Undergrounding offers numerous benefits to the local community by significantly improving neighborhood aesthetics by removing visible power lines and poles from the landscape, creating a cleaner, more visually appealing environment with unobstructed views. Vegetation management and community beautification projects are easier to implement with fewer utility wires to work around. Another benefit provided to the community is the enhancement of wildlife and habitat conservation in the adjacent open space area by removing utility lines that can obstruct flight paths and be an electrical hazard to birds. Undergrounding utility lines reduces fire hazards, accidents, safety risks, and power outages due to downed lines. Following emergencies, communities can also recover more quickly if key infrastructure remains intact. The Board established the County's first UUD in 1968, and since then, it has created over

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one hundred UUDs across the unincorporated area including one currently in design on Cole Grade Road in Valley Center.

In the early 2000s, the County identified a corridor along Bonita Road that qualified for the 20A Program extending from Bonita Christian Center Drive at the Chula Vista City Limit to the intersection of Bonita Road and San Miguel Road. This project was divided into four phases due to its size and available 20A Program credits. Construction on the first three phases, extending from Bonita Christian Center Drive at the Chula Vista City Limit to 400 feet southwest of Frisbie Street, were all completed by mid-2011. The fourth phase was never completed which left a gap on Bonita Road where utility poles and overhead lines are still present.

DPW recommends forming a UUD in Sweetwater on Bonita Road between 400 feet southwest of Frisbie Street and San Miguel Road to complete the fourth and final phase of undergrounding on Bonita Road which will create a continuous stretch of underground utilities along Bonita Road. This UUD represents a collaborative effort supported by the UUAC and Sweetwater Community Planning Group. Creating the UUD before June 8, 2025 will make this an active 20A Program project which allows the project to utilize available 20A Program credits paid by SDG&E. SDG&E has confirmed that they are prepared to add this project to their list of active 20A Program projects and will initiate the work when directed by DPW staff, following the UUD creation.

Today's request is for the Board of Supervisors to adopt a resolution of intention to set a public hearing date for forming the UUD, and to adopt an ordinance creating the Bonita Road Phase 4 UUD at a second hearing scheduled for May 21, 2025. After creating a UUD, County Code section 89.103 requires a resolution setting the time within which such removal and underground installation shall be accomplished. DPW will return to the Board at a later date to request Board action to set a deadline for the utility companies to relocate their equipment underground.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

On May 7, 2025, take the following actions:

1. Find that the proposed action is not subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) as specified under Section 15378(b)(5) of the State CEQA Guidelines because it is an administrative activity that does not result in direct or indirect physical changes to the environment. The action involves the adoption of a resolution and ordinance to form the Underground Utility District (UUD) for Bonita Road Phase 4. The establishment of a UUD is a procedural step that does not itself authorize, approve, or commit the County to specific construction activities; as such, the action is not subject to CEQA.
2. Adopt a Resolution setting a public hearing for May 21, 2025, entitled: RESOLUTION OF INTENTION TO FORM THE UNDERGROUND UTILITY DISTRICT NO. 118 BONITA ROAD (Attachment B).

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3. Introduce the following ordinance (first reading): AN ORDINANCE ADDING SECTION 89.319 TO THE SAN DIEGO COUNTY CODE OF REGULATORY ORDINANCES TO FORM AN UNDERGROUND UTILITY DISTRICT ON BONITA ROAD UNDERGROUND UTILITY DISTRICT NO. 118. (Attachment C)

If the Board takes the recommended actions on May 7, 2025, take the following action on May 21, 2025:

1. Adopt the following Ordinance (second reading): AN ORDINANCE ADDING SECTION 89.319 TO THE SAN DIEGO COUNTY CODE OF REGULATORY ORDINANCES TO FORM AN UNDERGROUND UTILITY DISTRICT ON BONITA ROAD UTILITY DISTRICT NO. 118. (Attachment C)

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The proposed Underground Utility District (UUD) falls within an underserved community within the Southeastern San Diego Live Well Community. The Live Well San Diego program has identified long-standing inequities and disparities in social indicators of health, safety, and the ability to thrive. The project will remove utility poles and overhead wires, thereby creating a more scenic and aesthetic roadway for all residents, businesses, and visitors to the area.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The proposed action will have social and environmental sustainability benefits. The proposed action to form an Underground Utility District (UUD) will support the County of San Diego's sustainability goal to transition to a green, carbon-free economy by: providing space for large trees and reducing exposure for wildlife; increasing reliability during most extreme weather events including high winds and storms, as undergrounding eliminates nearly all the risk of wildfire ignition from a power line; and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by reducing the need for vegetation management and overhead cable management.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for this request are included in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2025-26 CAO Recommended Operational Plan in the Department of Public Works (DPW) General Fund. If approved, this request will result in costs and revenue of \$50,000 in Fiscal Year 2025-26 for DPW staff time to establish the Underground Utility District (UUD), conduct outreach, and coordinate with San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E). The funding source is existing General Purpose Revenue (GPR) in DPW.

Future fiscal years' cost for staff time to coordinate and oversee the utility work and to return to the Board of Supervisors to set a deadline are estimated to be up to \$50,000 annually. The funding source for future years' cost is existing GPR in DPW. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

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Utility undergrounding can have a positive impact on local businesses by significantly reducing power outages caused by weather events, leading to less lost revenue during disruptions, improving aesthetics which can attract more customers, and potentially increasing property values in the area. By creating a more attractive and reliable business environment, undergrounding can stimulate economic growth and attract new businesses to the area. The initial construction phase may cause temporary disruptions to business operations. However, the long-term benefits of utility undergrounding for local businesses are expected to outweigh the short-term challenges.

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

The Underground Utility District (UUD) received support from two advisory groups. The first was the Underground Utility Advisory Committee (UUAC) which was established by the Board of Supervisors to review projects that meet the criteria for undergrounding, to coordinate plans and construction of these projects, and to develop a long-range plan for undergrounding in the unincorporated area. The UUAC consists of staff from the County Department of Public Works (DPW) and representatives from SDG&E, AT&T, and other telecommunication companies. The UUAC met on November 19, 2024, and unanimously approved the Bonita Road Phase 4 UUD. The project also received support from the Sweetwater Community Planning Group (CPG). Staff from DPW and SDG&E presented the project to the CPG at its December 3, 2024, meeting and again at its February 4, 2025, meeting where it received a vote with unanimous support.

BACKGROUND

The County of San Diego's (County) Department of Public Works (DPW) has worked with utility companies, including San Diego Gas and Electric (SDG&E), for over 50 years to enhance community aesthetics, improve public safety, and increase utility reliability through utility undergrounding. On September 19, 1967, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) adopted the Electric Tariff Rule 20A Program (20A Program), requiring electric and telephone companies to initiate and participate in an active program to underground utilities in areas of general public benefit. The rule was amended for electric companies on April 7, 2021, and again on June 13, 2023 to discontinue allocating funds for undergrounding as of December 31, 2022, and to rescind all prior allocations not used by December 31, 2023.

Under the 20A Program, electric utility companies set aside funds in the form of work credits to support undergrounding projects in areas that meet specific public interest criteria, such as major thoroughfares, scenic corridors, and locations with significant public benefits. Work credits act as a vouchers or non-monetary dollars assigned to a local government, which the local government can redeem to perform undergrounding projects in consultation with the serving utility on a one-work credit to one-dollar basis. The utility then recovers the cost of the completed project through rates.

In response to the 20A Program, the Board of Supervisors (Board) established Board Policy J-17 (J-17) Undergrounding of Existing Overhead Utility Facilities in 1970, which outlines the process for managing undergrounding projects and established an Underground Utilities Advisory Committee (UUAC). The UUAC is responsible for reviewing projects that meet the criteria for

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undergrounding, coordinating plans and construction of these projects, and developing a long-range plan for undergrounding in the unincorporated area. The UUAC is comprised of DPW staff and representatives from SDG&E, AT&T, and other telecommunication companies.

After the UUAC has recommended a project, the next step is to form an Underground Utility District (UUD). A UUD is a designated area created by ordinance that requires all current and future utility facilities to be located underground. The Board established the County's first UUD in 1968, and since then, it has created over one hundred UUDs across the unincorporated area including one currently in design on Cole Grade Road in Valley Center.

In the early 2000s, the County and the Sweetwater community jointly identified a corridor along Bonita Road that qualified for the 20A Program extending from Bonita Christian Center Drive at the Chula Vista City Limit to the intersection of Bonita Road and San Miguel Road. This project was divided into four phases due to its size and available 20A Program credits. Construction on the first three phases, extending from Bonita Christian Center Drive at the Chula Vista City Limit to 400 feet southwest of Frisbie Street, was completed by 2011. All above-ground utilities were relocated underground, and all utility poles removed, significantly enhancing the aesthetics and character of this community. The fourth phase was never completed which left a gap on Bonita Road where utility poles and overhead lines are still present.

The fourth phase of the project extends from 400 feet southwest of Frisbie Street to the intersection of Bonita Road and San Miguel Road. The UUD will cover approximately 2,600 linear feet along the road and lead to the removal of 24 poles. The undergrounding is anticipated to offer numerous benefits to the local community. It will significantly improve neighborhood aesthetics by removing visible power lines and poles from the landscape, creating a cleaner, more visually appealing environment with unobstructed views. Vegetation management and community beautification projects are easier to implement with fewer utility wires to work around. It may also enhance wildlife and habitat conservation in the adjacent open space area by removing utility lines that can obstruct flight paths and be an electrical hazard to birds. Undergrounding utility lines reduces fire hazards, accidents, safety risks, and power outages due to downed lines. Following emergencies, communities can also recover more quickly if key infrastructure remains intact. Recent regulatory changes by the CPUC have move away from programs like 20A. However, if the Board approves the proposed action to form a UUD, the undergrounding on Bonita Road will be eligible for 20A Program credits and meet the deadline of June 8, 2025 for initiating a project. All 20A credits expire after December 31, 2033.

DPW has found that the location on Bonita Road is consistent with J-17 guidelines and recommends forming a UUD at this location. The location is on a highly trafficked road, it is in a scenic location next to an open space, and it abuts a County-owned facility, the Sweetwater Regional Park. Both the UUAC and the Sweetwater Community Planning Group (CPG), support moving forward with the fourth and final phase of this project to relocate the remaining utilities underground.

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If the Board approves the proposed UUD, DPW staff will coordinate with the utility companies that own above-ground equipment within the UUD. Those utility companies are SDG&E, Cox, AT&T and Media 3. SDG&E will use 20A Program credits to fund the majority of the planning, coordination, design, and construction costs, while Cox, AT&T, and Media 3 will pay for their respective costs from their own capital funds. The County will be responsible for costs related to County staff time for coordination and oversight, as well as for overseeing the conversion of service lines and electric meter panels to operate with the underground equipment. Additionally, DPW staff will return to the Board to propose a subsequent resolution that will set a deadline for the utility companies to complete the undergrounding project.

DPW has one active undergrounding project which is on Cole Grade Road in the community of Valley Center. The project is split into two phases and is anticipated to utilize the majority of remaining 20A Program credits. DPW anticipates that after the Cole Grade Road undergrounding is complete, there will be sufficient work credits remaining to cover the estimated \$3.9 million cost of implementing the fourth phase of the Bonita Road undergrounding. The County's cost will be up to \$50,000 annually for staff to conduct outreach, return to the Board, and to coordinate and oversee the utilities' work. If the County's balance of remaining work credits is insufficient, no work will occur and the UUD will remain a latent undergrounding obligation until an alternative funding source becomes available.

Today's request before the Board of Supervisors is to adopt a resolution of intention for scheduling a public hearing and subsequently to adopt an ordinance for the Bonita Road Phase 4 UUD during a second hearing slated for May 21, 2025. Subsequent to creating a UUD, County Code section 89.103 requires a resolution setting the time within which such removal and underground installation shall be accomplished. In accordance with that requirement, DPW will return to the Board at a later date to request Board action to set a deadline for the utility companies to relocate their equipment underground.

ENVIRONMENTAL STATEMENT

Section 15378(b)(5) of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines provides that the proposed action is not subject to CEQA because it is an administrative activity that does not result in direct or indirect physical changes to the environment. The action involves the adoption of a resolution and ordinance to form an Underground Utility District (UUD) for Bonita Road Phase 4. The establishment of a UUD is a procedural step that does not itself authorize, approve, or commit the County to specific construction activities; as such, the action is not subject to CEQA.

Subsequent discretionary actions associated with the established UUD for Bonita Road Phase 4, including any future undergrounding work, will require separate environmental review by the applicable lead agency prior to the commencement of any activities, including property acquisition, construction, or the adoption of a resolution specifying the date when utilities must be undergrounded. If subsequent discretionary actions are not exempt from CEQA review, the next step will be preparing an Initial Study (IS) to evaluate whether the project qualifies for a Negative

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Declaration (ND), Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND), or requires an Environmental Impact Report (EIR). The level of CEQA documentation will depend on the scope of undergrounding activities and potential impacts on resources such as biological, cultural, and traffic conditions.

LINKAGE TO COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed action supports the County of San Diego's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan by including an initiative to improve sustainability, equity, and promote Safe and Livable Communities with an objective to develop and support services, programs, and initiatives that enrich our residents' quality of life. The Underground Utility District (UUD) program improves reliability and resilience to extreme weather conditions, which is essential for economic stability and prosperity. Climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of major events, such as severe storms and wildfires, meaning there are greater benefits from undergrounding. Furthermore, the UUD program enriches our residents' quality of life by visually improving local roadways.

Respectfully submitted,



Dahvia Lynch
Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

ATTACHMENT(S)

Attachment A – Vicinity Map Bonita Road Phase 4 Underground Utility District

Attachment B – Resolution of Intention to form an Underground Utility District No. 118 Bonita Road

Attachment C – An ordinance adding section 89.319 to the San Diego County Code of Regulatory Ordinances to form an underground utility district on Bonita Road Underground Utility District no. 118