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Tree Trimming Concerns Residents

By Leah M. Kosin
Observer Staff Writer

Early Tuesday morning, the sun peeked out from behind about a dozen trees that were recently trimmed behind the Hiddenbrook Community Center in Herndon.

The sight of the pruned trees and the way in which they were cut angered several homeowners, who gathered Tuesday to meet with representatives from Columbia Gas Transmission Corporation to voice their concerns.

According to resident Steve Pope, Columbia Gas began removing limbs Sept. 25 in order to inspect its easement from the air. He said the trimming has caused the trees to look disfigured and mutilated, and many of the residents said the cuts look unhealthy.

Douglas Petersen, an urban forester with the Department of Public Works and Environmental Services for Fairfax County, said many of the trees are forest grown.

This means that the chances of the trees dying are much greater when they are cut. This is just one more thing for residents to worry about, he said.

Residents said Tuesday they were also concerned that most of the trees were being cut on only one side. During high winds, the large unbalanced trees could fall over causing a lot of damage, they said.

Pope said he is also concerned because many of the limbs are not being secured with safety ropes before the cuts are made, so the limbs fall freely to the ground.

"It's horrible. We walked out here in horror. It's a horrific scene. It looks like a tornado came through," Pope said. "There are no safety lines. They're dropping branches on fences. It's a total shock."

In a release sent Monday, Brent Archer, director of Communications

and Government Affairs for Columbia Gas, said the right of way maintenance work is part of their comprehensive safety program to protect public safety and assure reliable natural gas services.

Archer said the two Columbia Gas lines in the Hiddenbrook community are large natural gas pipelines that provide vital services to Washington Gas, which services thousands of consumers in Northern Virginia.

The right of way above these lines must be cleared of any encroachment, natural or manufactured, that represents an impediment for the company in meeting its public service obligation, he said.

Resident Robert Carter said he is more upset that Columbia Gas did not issue homeowners with proper notification prior to the trimming.

He said he had no idea the work was going to take place until the day it officially started.

"Last Monday morning, my wife came in with a letter from Columbia Gas that said they would be trimming," Carter said. "So I called and I said, 'You know, this is pretty poor. The mail has just come and you mailed this on Friday.' And he said, 'Well I didn't mail it.'"

According to John Jackson, team leader for Columbia Gas, workers hand delivered notices Sept. 22, three days prior to the trimming.

"We had people hand delivering letters. We also had a contractor who had a handful of letters in case someone came up to him and started asking him what was going on," Jackson said. "These guys move pretty fast so we're about two weeks ahead of schedule. It may have helped out if we weren't two weeks ahead of schedule, but that's just the way it worked out."

However many residents said they never received a notification letter from Columbia Gas.

Jackson apologized Tuesday for the short notice but said the tree-trimming project is something that has to be done.

"They have the right to clear their easement. It's not a question of whether they're going to clear the easement. They've even told us again this morning they are. The question is how," said Vicky Dorman, legislative aide for Fairfax County Supervisor Joan DuBois. "They haven't said what they are going to do; they haven't marked any trees and they haven't had an arborist look at the trees to determine their health. We're not arguing their right to do it. Everybody understands that. It's the way they are going to do it and what kind of procedures they have."

Jackson said Columbia Gas would continue to clear the five pipeline miles in Fairfax County from the Loudoun County line to Dranesville

Road.

He said as long as they do not go past 70 feet, Columbia Gas is not breaking any laws by doing this.

"We are not here to make enemies. We want to be neighbors," Jackson said. "Basically we're out of sight, out of mind. Unfortunately right now we're not. So we're going to take into consideration what the county arborist has to say, and we also have a certified arborist that's working for us. But we will start cutting today. This is necessary."

Columbia Gas expects to finish the tree-trimming project in about a week.

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