

Beach Communities Frustrated By Sputtering Utilities Project

BY DOUG RUTTER

South Brunswick beach officials are becoming increasingly irritated by the lack of progress with underground wiring projects being coordinated by Brunswick Electric Membership Corp.

BEMC officials say the power company is moving as fast as it can while staying within its budget and juggling other work associated with new construction and line maintenance.

"I know there are a lot of folks frustrated by the slowness of it," Holden Beach Town Manager Gary Parker said. Work there began in 1988 and was originally expected to be finished last year.

The project is only about half completed. "I don't know there's a whole lot we can do about it other than calling them every so often and seeing where we are on the schedule," Parker said.

People at Holden Beach aren't the only ones annoyed by the slow progress. Town officials also are getting impatient at Ocean Isle Beach, where BEMC had made little headway since the work was requested in 1989.

"We're concerned that the project has not moved in as timely a manner as we thought it would," Mayor Betty Williamson said. "We knew from the beginning it was a five-year project, but we're disappointed with the progress."

Bobby Gore, operations manager at BEMC, said Monday progress will be made this year at Ocean Isle, Holden Beach and Sunset Beach.

Sections of all three islands are included in the company's two-year work plan.

Gore said BEMC has been paying independent contractors to do the work. "The two-year work plan is sort of like a budget. You're allotted so much money to do work within those two years."

Gore said Brunswick Electric was busy last year trying to keep up with new construction in the area. The company added between 3,000 and 3,500 new consumers in 1992.

"If you've got people in one area they're subject to be pulled off and go to another area that needs attention right away," he said. "We're trying to work three different sections, and that's a lot on our manpower."

Sunset Beach Town Administrator Linda Fluegel said there have been very few problems with the project since work began last August. "They're moving along real nice here."

Workers have been "careless" at times, however, and BEMC and Atlantic Telephone Membership Corp. haven't always coordinated their work burying power lines and television cables, Fluegel said.

Sunset Beach officials were told the project would take about four years to complete because crews have to be spread out among the three South Brunswick beaches.

BEMC is paying for most of the work. Once the project is finished, lot owners in improved areas will be billed \$1.15 per foot plus 3 percent tax. That comes out to about \$60 for a 50-foot-wide lot.

Beach officials say burying the power lines will make the islands safer in the event of a storm. Underground wiring also is aesthetically pleasing, which is an important factor in the local tourist-based economy.

At Ocean Isle, Williamson said the biggest concern is safety. The mayor said old power lines along the oceanfront caught fire three or four times last summer, threatening homes.

"We understand that they (BEMC) have to work within their budget, but we're concerned about the safety here due to power lines deteriorating," she said last week.

Parker said BEMC budget constraints have apparently contributed to the delay. "Like all of us, whether it's public or private institutions, we have limited resources."

Before work at Holden Beach started in 1988, BEMC officials estimated the project would take five years to finish. During a meeting with town officials last summer, Parker said the completion date was bumped to 1995 or 1996.

Work is completed from the east end of the island to High Point Street. Parker said crews have done "bits and pieces" elsewhere and are expected to return around the end of summer or early fall.

Holden residents have been disappointed by the lack of recent progress, especially after workers accomplished so much in the first 18 months of the project.

"I think people got the wrong impression when they came in here in

1988 and dove right in and made a lot of progress right away," Parker said. "I think people got the idea the work wouldn't take that long to finish."

Mayor Williamson said Ocean Isle officials were originally told the project would take five years to complete, starting in 1989.

However, work didn't begin in 1989 because of the cleanup required after Hurricane Hugo. The project was further delayed in 1990 when a new substation was built on N.C. 179.

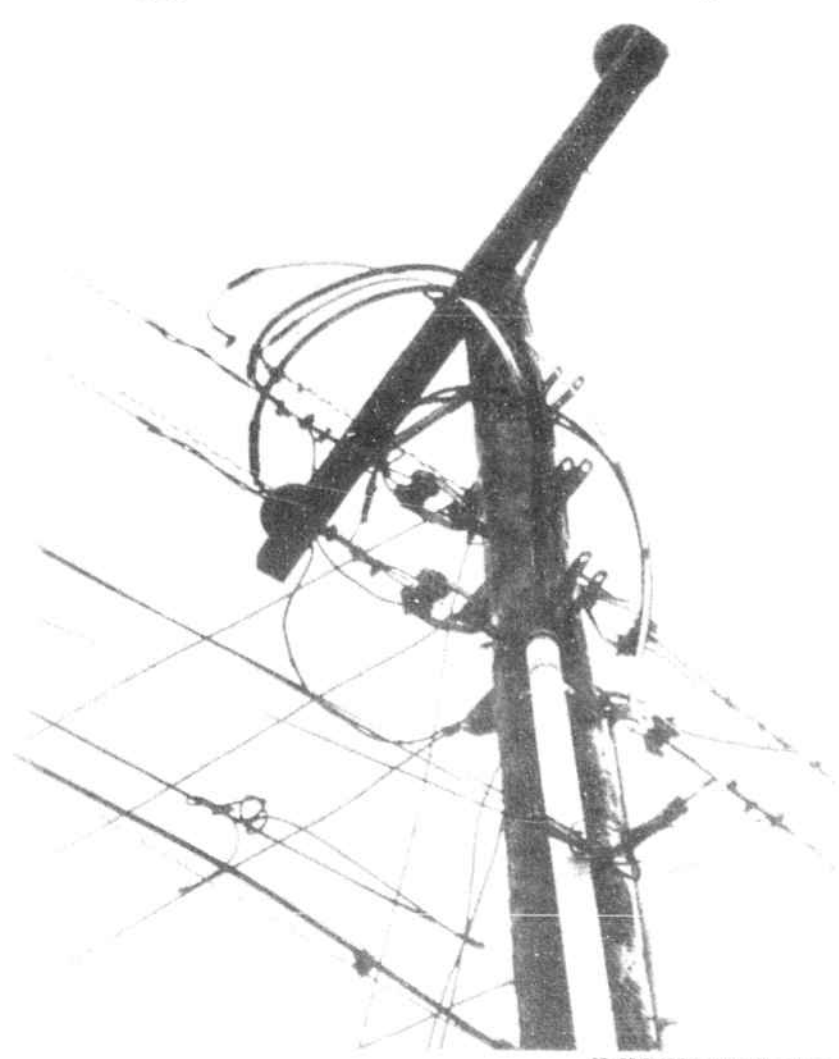
Williamson said she spoke with utility officials last fall after the project was discussed at a property owners association meeting. The mayor said BEMC assured her most of First Street would be completed this winter.

"We've had some work done, but we feel the spring is coming," she said. "Our beach season is only two or three months away and we cannot have that kind of construction during our beach season."

Ocean Isle Beach and Holden Beach have had to delay sidewalk construction while waiting for the power lines to go underground.

"Our property owners really enjoy those sidewalks," Williamson said. "We put our project on hold because of their (BEMC's) request."

Holden Beach Commissioner Jim Fournier said at a recent town meeting that the power company knew its work load before it started the project. "The net effect is they've ignored us."



STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER
THE SIGHT OF POWER LINES overhead is starting to annoy town officials at Holden Beach and Ocean Isle Beach, where underground wiring projects are moving slowly.

Public Hearing Set For Tuesday

A public hearing will be held Tuesday, Feb. 16, by the Brunswick County Board of Health on a proposed set of rules governing new mobile home parks and recreational vehicle campgrounds.

The hearing will begin at 7:30 p.m. in the Public Assembly Building at the Brunswick County Government Center at Bolivia. Copies of

the draft ordinance are available at the Environmental Health Section of the Brunswick County Health Department, said Jan Reichenbach, public health educator.

Existing mobile home or manufactured housing parks and recreational vehicle campgrounds would be exempt from the new ordinance.

The ordinance would establish standards for design, construction and layout of mobile home parks, with special requirements for water and sewer systems, drainage, garbage disposal and maintenance. It would provide for annual inspections and grading by the health department.

Boat Ramp Issue On Varnam Agenda

Varnamtown officials are expected to continue discussion of a proposal to improve the community's public boat ramp on Lockwood Folly River at their regular monthly meeting Monday night.

"I've had two or three people call me about the boat ramp and tell me they were coming to the meeting," Mayor Judy Galloway said. "I'm sure that it will come up."

At last month's meeting, a dozen residents voiced opposition to improving the ramp, fearing it would add to existing parking problems near the waterfront. Town officials said at the time that most residents want a new ramp.

Galloway said town officials also will discuss collection of overdue taxes Monday. The meeting starts at 7:30 p.m. in town hall.

Owner Seeks Setback Variance

A Holden Beach property owner has asked for an exception from the town regulation that requires houses be set back at least five feet from the side property lines.

The Holden Beach Board of Adjustment will consider Steve Middleton's variance request when it

meets Monday, Feb. 15, at 5 p.m. in town hall, said Building Inspector Dwight Carroll.

Carroll said a survey of the lot at 865 Ocean Boulevard West indicates that one corner of Middleton's partially-constructed home encroaches on the five-foot, side-yard setback.

Demos Set Rally, Meeting Tonight

Precinct chairman and vice chairmen are invited to the February meeting of the Brunswick County Democratic Party Executive Committee today (Thursday) at 7 p.m.

Chairman W.A. "Bill" Stanley said the meeting at the party head-

quarters building north of Supply on U.S. 17 Business will be followed at 7:30 p.m. by a rally "with all good Democrats of Brunswick County."

An upcoming fundraising event to be attended by Congressman Charlie Rose is among the topics for discussion.

SERENITY BY THE SEA AFTER SCHOOL CONNECTION

For more info call Janie at 754-2132. These classes will operate on school days only and will end on Fri. 5/28/93.

Beginning Monday, Feb. 15, there will be classes held for children gr. 4-8 from 3:30-5:00. These classes are designed to help children feel better about themselves. Lack of self esteem can cause problems at school as well as at home.

Register by Feb. 12. \$25 wkly.

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