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# PLANNING COMMISSION

Planning & Development Services Department • 201 N. Stone Ave. • Tucson, AZ 85701

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**Date:** March 10, 2022 for meeting scheduled March 16, 2022

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**To:** Planning Commission

**From:** Scott Clark  
Executive Secretary

**Subject:** C8-22-04 Underground Transmission Line Relief Special Exception  
UDC Text Amendment – Study Session (Citywide)

**Issue** – This study session is to review and discuss proposed Unified Development Code (UDC) text amendments to establish a Zoning Examiner Special Exception process which would allow relief from undergrounding requirements for transmission lines in Scenic Corridor Zone (SCZ) overlays and the Gateway Corridor Zone (GCZ) overlays, when certain criteria are met. This option is intended for situations where there are physical, archeological, cultural, or financial reasons that make placing utilities underground infeasible. This situation arose from a Zoning Administrator Determination (ZAD) issued related to the Kino to DeMoss-Petrie (DMP) 138kV Transmission Line Project on August 25, 2021, where it was determined “that the requirement to underground utilities within a Gateway Corridor Zone as indicated in Unified Development Code (UDC) Section 5.5.4.B.1.a, apply to the Kino to DMP 138kV Transmission Line Project.” Please see Attachment A for the August 25, 2021 ZAD. The result of this ZAD was that all new transmission lines in GCZs and SCZs must be installed underground.

On November 23, 2021 the Mayor and Council held an executive session and subsequent study session to discuss the ZAD and the requirement to underground transmission lines along SCZs and GCZs. At the study session, the Mayor and Council directed staff “to explore conditions under which a special exception process will be followed to explore relief from our existing Scenic and Gateway Corridor requirements.” Please see Attachment B for the materials and the Legal Action Report from the November 23, 2021 study session.

**Recommendation** – Staff recommends that the Planning Commission set the underground transmission line relief special exception UDC text amendment (Attachment C) for a public hearing on April 6, 2022.

**Background** – The following is the background of events leading to direction from Mayor and Council to create a Special Exception process to allow for relief from the undergrounding requirement in SCZs and GCZs in certain situations:

- On July 19, 2021, Tucson Electric Power sent the Planning and Development Services Department (PDSD) a formal request to provide a ZAD on the requirement for

- undergrounding the Kino to DMP 138kV Transmission Line Project. Please see Attachment D for the ZAD request letter.
- On August 25, 2021, the Zoning Administrator issued a determination that determined “that the requirement to underground utilities within a Gateway Corridor Zone as indicated in Unified Development Code (UDC) Section 5.5.4.B.1.a, apply to the Kino to DMP 138kV Transmission Line Project.” Please see Attachment A for the August 25, 2021 ZAD. The result of this ZAD was that all new transmission lines in SCZs and GCZs must be undergrounded.
  - On September 23, 2021, TEP submitted an appeal of the August 23, 2021 ZAD to PDSO arguing that the ZAD was an incorrect interpretation of the UDC, and requesting that the Board of Adjustment hear the appeal and reverse the decision in the ZAD.
  - On November 17, 2021, TEP requested the Board of Adjustment to provide the appeal request of the ZAD a 6-month extension. The Board of Adjustment voted 5-0 to grant the extension.
  - On November 23, 2021, the Mayor and Council held an executive session and subsequent study session to discuss the ZAD and the requirement to underground transmission lines along SCZs and GCZs. At the study session, the Mayor and Council directed staff “to explore conditions under which a special exception process will be followed to explore relief from our existing Scenic and Gateway Corridor requirements.” Please see Attachment B for the materials and the Legal Action Report from the November 23, 2021 study session.

**Present Considerations** – Pursuant to direction from Mayor and Council, the proposed amendment to the UDC to create a Zoning Examiner Special Exception Process for relief from utility underground requirements of SCZs and GCZs in certain circumstances where there are physical, archeological, cultural, or financial reasons that make placing utilities underground infeasible.

Per UDC section 3.4.3, the Zoning Examiner Special Exception Procedure is one which would allow for relief from those SCZ and GCZ requirement for underground transmission lines, but would require a public review and approval process where site specific zoning conditions may be added. A general overview of the process is as follows:

- Mailed neighborhood notification for a neighborhood meeting of all properties within 400 feet of the project and all neighborhood associations within 1 mile of the project prior to the submittal of the application.
- Application submittal detailing how the proposal meets all the requirements of the use-specific standards in the UDC.
- Staff review of the proposal with recommendation to the Zoning Examiner.
- Mailed notice of public hearing sent to all properties within 400 feet of the project and all neighborhood associations within 1 mile of the project.
- Notice of the public hearing posted on site and in local paper.
- Public Hearing before the Zoning Examiner for a decision.
- All appeals directed to Mayor and Council for a final decision.

Examples of other uses that are required to undergo the Zoning Examiner Special Exception Procedure include those for Utility Distribution systems (such as utility sub-stations), overnight animal boarding, non-chartered financial institution services, or micro-breweries as an accessory use in the C-1 Zone.

The following is a brief description of the proposed amendment.

Current Regulation – All new and replacement utility transmission lines are required be placed underground when located in a Scenic Corridor Zone or Gateway Corridor Zone.

Proposed Revision – Revise the use tables in UDC Sections 4.8.1 through 4.8.7 to include a new Transmission Lines land use type requiring a Zoning Examiner Special Exception Process and adding use specific standards for that Special Exception to UDC Section 4.9.11, and a new definition of Transmission Lines at UDC Section 11.1.1.E. The criteria for consideration of the Special Exception are as follows:

- Proposed overhead transmission lines are contextually sensitive to adjacent and surrounding zoning and land uses. Examples of this may include a proposed location that is industrially zoned or a proposal that results in a less adverse aesthetic impact or less adverse impact on viewsheds for surrounding properties.
- Underground construction causes significant increase in ground disturbance when compared to overhead construction in sensitive areas such as Environmental Resource Zone (ERZ), Watercourse Amenities, Safety and Habitat (WASH) wash crossings or environmentally and archeologically sensitive areas,
- Minimal impact on residential areas with adequate setback,
- Existing high-voltage transmission lines, vertical structures, or buildings in area that already compromise the viewshed,
- Overhead lines located on non-Gateway or non-Scenic corridor route that perpendicularly cross a Gateway Corridor Zone or Scenic Corridor Zone,
- Repair or upgrade of existing facilities where proposed facilities are similar in size and scale to the existing facilities being repaired or replaced,
- Transmission lines are proposed in an area where there is an existing presence of railroad, highway and/or bridge crossings, or in an area where installation underground would interfere with other existing undergrounded utilities,
- Proposed transmission lines provide electrical service to critical customers where overhead lines are strongly recommended for specialized operations; examples include but are not limited to: provision of electricity to Davis Monthan AFB or other installations necessary to the national defense, hospitals, research facilities, etc.,
- Proposed overhead transmission lines, rather than undergrounded transmission lines on a particular route, would avoid undesirable aesthetic, viewshed, or other adverse impacts that would result from facilities being located on an alternative route,

- Proposed project in an area where cost to install underground would have a disparate impact on low-income residents. Satisfaction of this criteria alone is not sufficient as a finding for approval and must be found in conjunction with at least one other criterion.
- A Special Exception request to relieve the requirement to underground transmission lines that meets the findings established by UDC section 3.4.5, *Findings* and which also meets criteria a, e, and g of this subsection is deemed to presumptively meet the required findings for approval.

**Attachments:**

A – August 25, 2021 Zoning Administrator Determination on the TEP Kino to DMP 138kV Transmission Lines Project

B – November 23, 2021 Mayor and Council Materials and the Legal Action Report

C – Draft underground transmission line relief Special Exception UDC text amendment

D – July 19, 2021 TEP Zoning Administrator Determination request