



The Hon. Alex B. Morse, Mayor
City Hall
Holyoke, MA

August 12, 2013

Dear Mayor Morse,

We are writing this letter in response to the recent news, confirmed by the Office of Planning and Development, that the power poles and electrical lines along Phase II of the Holyoke Canalwalk project will not be removed as previously planned. As you probably agree, this is a very unfortunate turn of events since the poles and lines along the walkway will be a great detraction to an otherwise beautiful and very expensive design project.

From the very beginning of Phase II, the removal of the lines by HG&E was considered a critical stage in the project and one that we all came to expect, including the Office of Planning and Development, as cited in a letter we received from Karen Mendrala in November of 2012 when 75% of the design plan was submitted to Mass DOT. The proposed work of burying the utilities by HG&E is also noted in the 100% design submitted by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, the firm hired by the city to design Phase II of the canalwalk. In fact, over the many years of planning and design that this project has undergone, never once has there been any public discussion of serious cost concerns shared by the Planning Office, the City or HG&E regarding the removal of the poles and the burying of the utility lines. If this was an unrealistic or unacceptable expense, why hadn't the City or HG&E mentioned it long before the plans achieved 100% design completion? Certainly earlier consideration of this potential expense would have prompted a more modest design plan that could have accommodated the expense thus eliminating the visual congestion the utility structures that abound the canal's edge pose. There were certainly years to do this.

We can only speculate that this was either a result of poor judgment in the planning phases or it was a relatively last minute decision made by HG&E alone, to refuse to do the work. If it is the later case, it seems an egregious disregard of a former agreement made by the City and HG&E at a point now when it would be impossible to revisit the design plan and reassess the budget without setting the entire project back three years and risk losing the federal funds that have been earmarked for the canalwalk. At this point delaying the project is the last thing that anyone would want, especially the FOC members who have put many years of personal time and effort into supporting all phases of the Canalwalk project. We would however, like to request, with the help of your office, that further consideration be made by the Planning Office and HG&E toward finding a way to work together on this important stage of the construction. There is no doubt that the project, as it stands, will beautify and enhance the canal and streetscape but our concern is that by leaving even the straightest and most evenly spaced poles in place their reticulated profile and swag of lines amid the carefully designed features of the canalwalk, will look like an afterthought, giving the impression that the project was not thoroughly visualized or done entirely well.

We fully understand that there are limitations and that unforeseen obstacles arise in projects of this size, however the exclusion of the utility work as planned throughout the entire design process is a significant setback and one that is all the more shocking based on the timing of the decision. We would ask that you review this decision while there is still time to remove or bury the utilities and advocate for re-implementing the work. Any help that you and your office may be able to extend in finding a better solution to this matter would be deeply appreciated.

Sincerely,

The Friends of the Canalwalk

Cc: Marcos Marrero, James Lavelle