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# CITY OF LOS ANGELES

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June 16, 2021

The Honorable Bob Blumenfield, Chair  
Public Works Committee  
Los Angeles City Council

c/o Michael Espinosa  
Office of the City Clerk  
City Hall, Room 395

## **COUNCIL FILE 21-0301 MICRO-TRENCHING / DIRECTIONAL BORING / UNDERGROUND UTILITIES INSTALLATION / DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS**

Dear Councilmember Blumenfield:

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. REQUEST the City Attorney, with assistance from the Bureau of Engineering (BOE) and Bureau of Street Services (StreetsLA), to draft an Ordinance such that the Street Damage Restoration Fee (SDRF) calculation methodology for small excavations applies to the direct excavation area only and that the extra 5 feet that is currently applied to all sides of excavations not be applied to these smaller excavations.
2. INSTRUCT the BOE to continue to develop standards for trenchless technologies such as horizontal boring and punching technologies.

### **BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION**

On June 9, 2021, the Public Works Committee adopted the subject motion with the following instruction:

I THEREFORE MOVE that the Bureau of Engineering be instructed to report to the City Council on the development of standards for directional boring and similar utility installation methods and to include



recommendations if any code or policy changes are needed to facilitate the implementation and development of new City utility installation standards.

Generally, the BOE would wait until the full City Council adopts a motion before submitting our report back, however we are submitting this report based on the Public Works Committee adoption in order to try to allow the recommendations to be considered before the summer recess. Should the final Council recommendations differ from those adopted by the Public Works Committee, the BOE will submit a supplemental report should it be necessary.

The BOE agrees that when conducted properly, and in the appropriate circumstances, horizontal boring and other trenchless technologies can allow utilities to be installed with less damage to City streets and sometimes with less traffic impacts as well. The BOE does allow horizontal drilling and other trenchless technologies at the current time, but does not have standards to cover the common small diameter technologies and therefore requirements for such installations are specified on a permit by permit basis. Having standards for common installation methods would improve efficiency for both the City and the applicant, and would likely increase the utilization of those methods. The BOE began work on standards over a year ago for the two most common methods, small diameter horizontal directional drilling as well as small diameter punching. Both standards are nearing completion with input from the utility community. We anticipate that these standards will be complete and issued before the end of the calendar year.

Aside from the development of standards, there is one other step that BOE recommends that the City Council consider which could increase the use of trenchless methods in the City. BOE recommends that the City Council revise the SDRF calculation methodology for small excavations, such as for pits and potholing, such that it applies to the direct excavation area only and that the extra 5 feet that is currently applied to all sides of excavations for SDRF calculations not be applied to these smaller excavations.

Currently our SDRF applies to an excavation area plus five feet on all sides based on the findings of the SDRF study which is available in Council File 14-1571. The SDRF study found that trenches often weakened the street structure for a distance averaging about 5 feet beyond the trench limits. The BOE reviewed the study and concurred with the findings and recommendations. However, in implementing the SDRF BOE has observed that the methodology results in having a great impact on very small excavations. A two-foot by two-foot excavation, which totals four square feet, is assessed an SDRF fee based on a 12-foot by 12-foot excavation, 144 square feet. Furthermore, it is not clear whether these smaller excavations would have the same 5-foot area of influence that traditional trenches exhibited in the SDRF study.

Trenchless installation methods generally have sending and receiving pits, and often interim pits for visual confirmation depending on the length. They also often need to pothole nearby utilities to ensure that they do not damage them. Adding 5 feet to all sides of each of these small excavations results in an SDRF that may be very similar to the SDRF of a continuous trench. The application of the 5-foot influence area to the pits and

potholing excavations may impact the decision by a utility to utilize trenchless methods. We have similarly observed these pits and potholing excavations resulting in a large SDRF fee for micro-trenching. Prior to micro-trenching, the SDRF for these small excavations in regular trenching was not an issue because their locations would generally overlap the trench excavation SDRF area and thus there was not an extra SDRF charge for the small excavations.

A change to the SDRF methodology for small excavations may also have a benefit to property owners needing to repair their sewer lateral. BOE has observed cases where the SDRF fee was a significant financial difficulty to repair the sewer. Many sewer repairs may be able to be conducted using spot repairs or trenchless technologies to fall within the small excavation area. Alternatively, if directed by City Council, the definition of a small excavation could be drafted such that it covers any size of excavation needed to repair a damaged sewer lateral if the City Council was interested to charge a lower SDRF for these situations since they are different than a typical street excavation. Permits to repair sewers do not account for a very significant portion of the overall SDRF revenue to the City.

Should the City Council approve the recommendation to remove the 5-foot influence area from the SDRF calculation for small excavations, BOE proposes to work with StreetsLA on the definition of a "small excavation" and to work with the City Attorney to incorporate it into the draft Ordinance for City Council consideration.

If you have any questions concerning this matter, please contact BOE Deputy City Engineer, Ted Allen, at [ted.allen@lacity.org](mailto:ted.allen@lacity.org).

Sincerely,



Gary Lee Moore, PE, ENV SP  
City Engineer

GLM/TA/:jgr

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cc: Jennifer McDowell, Office of the Mayor