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NStar tree removal in Needham likely delayed until next year

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By Evan Allen, Town Correspondent

NStar will probably not cut down tall trees growing around high-voltage transmission lines that run through the town of Needham this year as the utility had originally planned, according to NStar spokesman Michael Durand.

The utility's work is on hold until it completes easement boundary surveys requested by Needham officials, which Durand estimated would take several more months.

"It's unlikely that we'll be continuing our right of way maintenance in Needham this year," said Durand.

This summer, NStar announced plans to remove tall trees and vegetation from a four-mile stretch of high voltage transmission lines that run through Needham as part of a larger right-of-way vegetation management program.

Under the program, no trees with the potential to grow higher than 3 feet will be allowed to remain under high-voltage transmission wires; no trees with the potential to grow higher than 15 feet will be allowed to remain in the border zone. The policy does not apply to lower-voltage distribution power lines that run along neighborhood streets. It was adopted in 2010.

High voltage transmission lines supply tens of thousands of customers with power, according to the utility, and falling trees are the single greatest cause of power outages.

In August of this year, Attorney General Martha Coakley [recommended that the state fine NStar \\$9.7 million](#) for its response to damage caused by severe storms last year that left hundreds of thousands without power. Many of the outages were caused by falling trees.

The utility's plan angered Needham residents and officials, who said that it was too drastic an approach to ensuring reliable power. Some of the trees that would be cut down are in people's yards. The utility holds easements for the properties that would be affected, but the town requested that it conduct easement boundary survey work to make sure that the easements the utility is using are correct.

After the survey work is completed, Durand said, the utility will proceed with its original plans. The utility has also committed to responding to a [letter](#) from town officials before it begins work.

This year, NStar has cut trees and vegetation in Sherborn, Framingham, Natick, Wayland and Sudbury. Needham is part of a 17-mile stretch of transmission lines that runs from Southborough to West Roxbury. Work along that line is ongoing, said Durand.

Residents across the metrowest area were [enraged](#) by NStar's work, but Durand said that Needham is the only town he is aware of where work was halted for a large-scale surveying project.

"The more time we have to talk about this, the better," said Needham Board of Selectmen Chair Jerry Wasserman.

Wasserman said that he is still hoping the town can convince the utility to modify its plans. He would like to see work conducted gradually instead of all at once, he said, and to have the town's parks department involved.

Durand said that the utility's plans remain unchanged. They include offering mitigation to residents who have trees cut down, such as stump-grinding and plantings in landscaped yards, he said.

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