



OG&E promises better electricity in downtown Norman

NORMAN — Power outages and surges has been a problem from downtown Norman residents and businesses for years, and as the downtown business sector revitalized, issues with electricity only increased.

OG&E Manager of Community Affairs James Chappel said that should no longer be an issue after Jan. 31. But until then, work crews in orange trucks and temporary, planned outages will be the norm.

“All of this inconvenience is for a better service quality for downtown, for a more stable system,” Chappel said.

The electrical load currently carried by an older substation on Comanche Avenue is being moved to three newer substations around Norman.

Chappel said a few years ago OG&E did what it could to update the system, but it is aging and the area is landlocked by other downtown development.

Ward 4 city council member Bill Hickman said OG&E is committed to improving the reliability and capacity of the downtown power grid, but he has heard many Normanites voice their frustration.

Hickman lives and works in the downtown corridor and he said the persistent worry over outages and surges affects everyone living and working in the area.

Retailers have seen credit card readers destroyed in surges, restaurateurs have to worry about food going bad in refrigerators that don't work and Hickman said he and other workers in downtown

offices have to make sure they save important documents often in case their computers loose power or fry in a surge.

“And I hear routinely as a councilor from other business owners that have had problems with the reliability of their power,” Hickman said. “It creates a capacity limit on the growth of our historic downtown area.”

The Downtowners Merchant Association has been talking about the issue for years, according to Hickman, and problems with power also regularly affect residents in the Miller Historic District and Old Silk Stocking neighborhood.

Chappel said OG&E has worked toward addressing issues with power in downtown Norman for about five years. But before the electrical utility could move power to the other three substations in town, Chappel said it had to make sure those stations were upgraded and could handle the increased load.

The improvements have cost OG&E about \$13 million over the past five years.

All of the feeder lines have already been built between downtown Norman and these substations over the past two or three years. Now, Chappel said OG&E is changing out conductors and wiring to newer, more durable equipment along with re-insulating anything that is already up-to-date.

“We’re actually doing a little extra because we have the bird, squirrel and pest problem downtown,” Chappel said. “We’re doing what we call a line cover. All the bare eaves will be covered in insulation, that is not a normal process, but for Norman it is a big deal.”

Many of the old power poles are also being replaced, which means other services like phone lines and cable television have also been temporarily impacted. But many of the wires hanging off the poles weren’t active and were left when different utility and service providers moved out of the area.

Chappel said OG&E has four crews on eight trucks working on finishing the updates everyday.

He also said OG&E is trying to schedule power outages only after regular business hours. But downtown Norman isn’t just active from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Restaurants and bars are open late and many host live music.

If there has been any lack of communication with local businesses, Chappel said that is on him, but he wants local business owners and residents to call him if they have any questions or problems.

“I’m the guy. We can work around whatever we have to, there shouldn’t be a problem,” Chappel said. “The whole idea from the beginning of this was to do this without being disruptive.”

OG&E has already moved power outage times based on feedback from some businesses.

The improvements are being carried out on a good faith agreement with the city of Norman while OG&E and the city continue to negotiate a new franchise agreement.

The first official talks took place earlier this week.

Hickman said the city has contracted Jim Roth, a former Oklahoma Corporation Commissioner and the Phillips Murrah firm to represent the city in the discussions. Roth is the director and chair of his firm’s clean energy practice group.