Clearance, not appearance!

PECO is currently trimming street trees in Pottstown to clear its wires. The utility generally trims trees every five years, and the results aren't pretty.

The longer PECO waits to trim trees, the more it has to cut them back.

On a five-year cycle, PECO wants the minimum distance to be 4 to 8 feet for side clearance between branches and energized wires, and between 4 and 15 feet below energized wires.

Usually, PECO’s contractors provide the maximum amount of clearance. This results in horribly disfigured trees.

Clearance, not appearance!

Of course, we all want safe and reliable electric service, but why are utility wires strung out on poles along our streets in the first place?

Shade trees are needed in the public right-of-way because that’s where people travel and congregate every day. That’s where the asphalt is otherwise baking in the summer sun.

Other utilities like water, sewer, and gas pipes share the same right-of-way, but they don’t conflict with trees and people because they’re buried. Electric lines should be buried as well. In fact, PECO already buries wires in select downtown areas and routinely does so in post-war suburban subdivisions.

In older towns like Pottstown, however, it’s a different story.

It’s much cheaper for utilities to keep wires in the air, even though they require thousands of unsightly wooden poles and mutilate our vistas.

Even in cases where burying electric wires is deemed too expensive, a compromise solution is “tree cable,” a system of bundling insulated electric wires on utility poles so trees can co-exist with them. Bundled wiring requires far less clearance from tree limbs, so branches can grow up and around power lines (as well as the phone and cable wires below them), screening all the wires from view.

Aerial wires hanging over our streets have been around so long we think they’re a necessary part of the landscape. They aren’t. They should be buried or bundled and screened with trees.

Commentary by
Tom Hylton

These ash trees on Queen Street were last trimmed by PECO in 2012 to clear the wires. They are being trimmed again this year.

The top wires are the energized wires, which must be clear of tree branches. The lower wires are for telecommunications (phone and cable) which generally do not need clearance.

As the photo demonstrates, PECO provides huge clearance distances between branches and wires. Clearance, not appearance!