Asplundh fined for illegal hires

Every five years, a phalanx of orange Asplundh trucks invades Pottstown to clear tree branches from PECO wires. Asplundh is the long-time contractor for PECO. At one time, the lines were cleared every three years, but to save money, PECO stretched the cycle to five years. Of course, that means the trees have to be cut back much harder, to account for five years’ growth instead of three, but aesthetics and tree health have never been priorities with PECO. Clearance, not appearance!

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 towns like Pottstown, however. The poles are out front, mutilating our vistas.

It is possible to trim trees so as to provide clearance without disfiguring trees.

In fact, years ago the Pottstown Tree Fund hired the retired line clearance director for Pennsylvania Electric, in Johnstown, to meet with PECO and Asplundh specialists to discuss ways to minimize the impact of trimming trees while still providing ample clearance.

PECO listened very politely before ignoring his recommendations.

Last month, Asplundh was fined a whopping $95 million for using undocumented immigrants — as much as 10 percent of its workforce — to trim trees.

These employees worked under grueling conditions but were not likely to complain about their pay and working conditions.

This is unfortunately one more instance of placing profits above a community’s quality of life, and even above the law.

Commentary by Thomas Hylton

TOP, Asplundh removes all but one branch of a 20-year-old tree on Walnut Street during its tree trimming cycle last fall. BELOW, an Asplundh truck on a work day in Pottstown.