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Qwest halts preparations to clear way for light rail

Communications firm wants reimbursement

RACHEL E. STASSEN-BERGER STAFF WRITER

Qwest Communications employees were told Friday to stop all work related to moving their utilities beneath Fifth Street in downtown Minneapolis to make way for light rail, according to a company spokesman.

It would cost between \$14 million and \$18 million to move the utilities, said Qwest spokesman Bryce Hallowell.

“That is a cost this company is not willing to pay,” he said.

The Fifth Street tangle of utility facilities, owned by many companies, must be moved to make way for light rail to run above ground.

The Qwest move follows a lawsuit filed Friday by Xcel Energy, which seeks reimbursement for the cost of moving its utilities for the rail line. According to the Xcel lawsuit, it would cost \$16 million to \$18 million to move that company's utilities.

The Minnesota Transportation Department contends it would cost between \$8 million to \$12 million to move all the private utilities under Fifth Street. According to a recent fact sheet prepared by the department, moving all the needed Xcel Energy utilities would cost at most \$5 million.

Last year, the city of Minneapolis dug up part of Fifth Street downtown so it could move its utilities at a cost of \$6.5 million.

Light-rail officials have long maintained private utilities must pay the cost of moving any underground utilities.

Dayna Kennedy, spokeswoman for the light-rail project, said the Qwest move was disappointing.

``We're sorry that Xcel has forced them to reassess their position," Kennedy said of the Qwest decision.

Hallowell said, however, that Qwest's decision to stop work is independent of the Xcel lawsuit. Continuing work on planning would not be prudent until Qwest has a guarantee that the money the company spends to move the underground utilities would be paid back, he said.

Until the action Tuesday, Qwest was planning to do preliminary work within the next few weeks and do major digging in the spring.

Although the light-rail project faces a tight schedule, light-rail officials say the recent issues swirling over utility relocation would not change the timeline to complete the 11.5-mile line from downtown Minneapolis to the airport and the Mall of America by 2004.

Over the past two years, negotiators for the Transportation Department, Qwest and Xcel have talked about how much moving utilities would cost, who would pay that cost and how the move would be done. Both utility companies have said that during those negotiations, department officials said there would be money in the light-rail project's \$675 million budget to help pay that cost.

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