

Dig Safe to Stay Alive

With the arrival of Spring it's time for landscaping, building and many other projects to start that require digging to complete. When you think about it, digging or excavation is a simple task, but it is one that could have significant consequences if not prepared for and completed properly. The area that you're digging in may contain any one of many buried underground utility lines; there may be overhead utility lines that your equipment may come in contact with; or if you're digging a large enough hole that you will enter to work in, you might be exposed to collapsing trench walls. According to the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, in the pipeline industry alone, there has been more than \$1.7 billion worth of property damage, 1,906 injuries and 421 deaths attributable to excavation near pipelines over the last twenty years. Excavation safety is vital for everyone, from the professional contractor to the do-it-yourselfer planting a single tree in the back yard!

Call Before You Dig –

When you think of excavation, you typically think of large construction equipment digging trenches or large holes. However, there are many seemingly simple projects homeowners complete, such as yard grading, gardening and installing fences and mailbox posts, that pose a threat of damage, injury, or death. For all excavation activities, Minnesota law requires the person doing the digging to get the project area located and marked for buried utilities that may be present.

Many of you may be familiar with the terms "Call Before You Dig" or "Gopher State One Call". These are the highly successful and publicized programs that Minnesotans have used to get the underground utility lines located prior to any excavations. Calling for the locating of buried utility lines prior to excavation is a state law and it is a free service to you. You can call 1-800-252-1166 and be connected to a service professional that will walk you through the process. You can also visit their website at www.gopherstateonecall.org to get more information prior to the call. While you are at that website, you can download a free copy of the "Homeowner's Call Before You Dig" guide. The utility companies have 2 business days from the time you called to physically mark any utilities or declare your project area to be free of utilities.

There is a new kid on the block for utility locating requests this year with a program called 811. This is a new program meant to simplify the request for location services nationwide. By simply calling 811 on your telephone you will be directed to your local one call center, which for Minnesotans is the "Gopher State One Call". Many professional excavators have been utilizing one call centers for more than three decades; it is intended that 811 will assist in the goal to call in every dig, every time.

Many people contact OPU every year asking how deep our gas, electric and water utility lines are. This may seem like an easy question to answer, but in reality there is no definitive answer. OPU does require that our utility lines be placed to standard minimum depths, but due to activities like landscaping, construction or erosion, these depths change over time. The only way to find out is to carefully hand dig over the locate marks and physically see the

utility. By law you are required to carefully hand dig to expose the underground utilities when your excavation is within 24” of all locate marks.

It is important for excavators to report any nick, scrape, scratch or hit of any utility line to OPU. This is because even minor abrasions to a line may cause corrosion and eventual line failure. OPU will come out and repair all non-negligent hits at no charge to the excavator.

Overhead Utility Lines –

While you are completing your excavation it seems that all your attention is focused towards the ground and what is located beneath it. But there are other equally important hazards you may need to be aware of. Make sure there are no overhead lines that you or your equipment may come in contact with. If you are working or operating equipment within 10’ of any overhead lines you can contact OPU at 507-451-1616 to have us place cover ups on the line to further protect you. Always remember that even if you see overhead lines there still may be buried underground lines present.

Safe Trenches –

If you are digging a trench that is deeper than 4’ and will be entering the trench to complete your work, then you need to be aware of the danger created by the possibility of the trench walls unexpectedly caving in and burying you. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has specific legal requirements of what is considered a safe excavation. You can visit their web site at www.osha.gov to get additional details or to find contact information. Excavation safety is a very serious issue to be considered. In 2005 trench accidents took 44 lives in the US alone. The average soil weighs approximately 3000 lbs. per cubic yard or as much as a car. It does not take long to crush or suffocate a victim of a cave in. It is important to call 911 and request professional help immediately in any trench cave-in situation. Never enter a trench that has vertical or unstable walls, even if only for a brief time.

If you have any questions regarding your gas, electric or water service OPU is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week at 507-451-1616. We pride ourselves in serving you the customer and providing safe, reliable service everyday.

Please have a safe digging season. - Owatonna Public Utilities

Links of Interest:

www.owatonnautilities.com

www.gopherstateonecall.org

www.excavationsafetyguide.com

www.osha.gov

www.call811.com