The Power Grid We Tolerate

A Case for Undergrounding Electric Distribution in America



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Drive down almost any commercial road and you'll see it: taller poles, wider extension arms, and trees cut back just to make room for another layer of wires.

This isn't modernization. It's improvisation.

Overhead power systems were never designed for the demands we now place on them. Instead of replacing them, we've stretched them—

literally and figuratively—beyond their limits.

Every “upgrade” follows the same pattern: add another line, another arm, another workaround. We don’t redesign the system—we bolt onto it.

The result is obvious.

Taller poles. Wider arms. More tree butchering—and a lack of imagination.

Utilities call this maintenance. But maintenance is supposed to preserve a system. What we’re doing now is compensating for one that no longer fits its purpose.

If we were designing our power grid from scratch today, no one would propose miles of exposed wires on wooden poles running through trees and traffic corridors. We accept it only because it’s what we’ve always had.

And that’s the real problem.

We’ve confused familiarity with necessity.

The cost isn’t just financial. It’s visual clutter, aggressive tree trimming, roadside hazards, and constant disruption. It’s a system that works—until it doesn’t—then requires crews, cones, and repeated repairs to bring it back.

We tell ourselves we’re improving reliability. In reality, we’re extending the life of an outdated design.

The power grid we patch is the grid we keep.

And the grid we tolerate is still the grid we choose.Drive down almost any commercial road and you’ll see it: taller poles, wider extension arms,

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