

Call Before You Dig, But Beware — Not Every Utility Gets Marked!

Imagine this: you have a project that requires you to make a hole in the ground with a shovel, a trencher, a skid-steer or some other digging tool. You're aware that hitting an underground utility — a pipe, power line, fiber cable, etc. — can be expensive and dangerous. You want to do the right thing and adhere to the law, so you contact Gopher State One Call, generate an excavation ticket, and wait 48 hours for utility people to mark the areas you must avoid. With the utilities marked, the ground surface becomes an explosion of colors, and you're clear to start your project. Right? Wrong!

The law does not require ALL underground utilities to be indicated; the ones falling in the category of "private facilities" may go unmarked, including some electric and natural-gas facilities. Your in-ground sprinkler system probably will not be marked, along with a substantial portion of the sewer line under your yard. If there are gas or electric facilities buried after the meter ("downstream" from the meter in the directional flow) on your property, they may not be marked, either. These are all examples of "private facilities" that are not owned by the utility, but by the property owner — and therefore not required to be marked by utility employees.

In light of this reality, what can you do to assure your personal safety and the integrity of your private facilities as you complete your project? These actions will help:

1. If you are not the original property owner, it may be necessary to contact previous owners or long-time neighbors to determine whether private facilities were installed prior to your ownership.
2. Be a detective. Look around the proposed excavation site for clues, including:
 - a. A gas meter with no yellow markings on the property
 - b. An electric meter with no red markings on the property
 - c. In-ground sprinkler heads
3. If you have a city sewer system, the operator is required to mark it in the right-of-way and indicate the spot where it leaves the right-of-way and goes into your property. If it's not marked, call the city and find out where your service line comes off the main sewer pipe and goes into your yard. Use hand tools to dig carefully around the spot where it should be.
4. If you have a septic system, locate it (or hire a private locator) and mark it yourself so you can avoid damaging it.
5. Look for devices powered by gas or electricity — things like lights, grills, or heated swimming pools — that do not have markings leading to the device.
6. If evidence suggests that private facilities are present in the ground where you will be working, consider hiring a private locator. A private locator is someone who will come to the job site and attempt to locate private, underground facilities.

Anytime an excavation occurs, care must be taken. Knowing what steps to take on your own, even after Gopher State One Call has been contacted, will assure a safe and successful project.

