Highlands lost power for an extended period during the aftermath of Hurricane Helene and the recent winter storm.  The problem was with the Duke transmission line to Highlands around Hicks Road due to trees falling on these major transmission lines.  It takes Duke a prolonged period to restore this highly energized system.

To further minimize this hazard and problem, Duke plans to remove 28 trees in their right of way that could fall and knock out the transmission system feeding power to Highlands.  Working around such high-power lines in removing trees is and unacceptable danger to Duke workers.  Normally, a **project of this size takes about 3 days using a normal staffing** level, but Duke is bringing multiple crews to do this work from 8 am to 6 pm on Wednesday, February 26.  Duke will also be replacing and repairing some of the transmission poles. Duke will have to cut power to **Highlands for only about 10 hours**.

About 100 workers will be on the worksite.  Duke will have specialized transmission crews on site, distribution crews, and multiple tree removal crews.  They also plan on having two cranes at the work area.  There will be traffic control personnel on Hicks Road directing traffic to alternative routes.  Residents on the road will have controlled access to their homes.

Duke anticipates the work being done and full power restored within 10 hours.  This projected schedule may be longer or shorter given the conditions and barring unforeseen circumstances.

The outage will impact the town of Highland's electrical customers only.  There are some town electric customers in outside areas like Horse Cove who will lose power.  On the other hand, some town residents are served by Haywood EMC and will not be affected by the outage.

Town generators will be operative during the outage.  The Town Hall and the recreation center will remain open.  Generators at all pump stations will operate the water and sewer systems.  We also have generators to keep the police headquarters and fire departments operative.  The local EMS facility also uses a generator system.

The work to be done is on the Duke Energy grid, and they have decided on the outage date.  They have to stage about 100 personnel from various locations and equipment to remove the tree as fast as possible. After February 26, Duke crews will continue to clean up the tree removal areas while the power flows overhead to the town.

Duke has coordinated with the Highlands School to select a date when school would not be in session. February 26 was scheduled to be a half day for students.  Now the school will be closed on that day.

Some folks would question if there were alternatives to shutting the power off for a full day during the workweek.  One merchant told me the work should be done on Sunday when his business was closed.  I pointed out that churches have services on Sundays, and they would be impacted by a loss of power, as well as Restaurants which would also be affected.

Others think this work can be done at night or while the power is still on.  Working at night or near electrified transmission lines is potentially dangerous or even deadly to linemen and tree removal workers.

Another alternative suggested was to work only 5 hours a day for two days to minimize the impact on businesses.  The Duke folks state that they are amassing 100 personnel to accomplish the job in a single day, which is a difficult logistical task.  Getting the personnel over two days and to work on Sundays would be problematic.

The good news is that this outage is almost a month away and there is time for businesses and residents to make plans to minimize their daily routine for 10 hours.   While the outage is underway, our town electric crews will be making upgrades to the grid and replacing old parts.  The benefit of doing town work on the same day is that areas of town will not have to lose power on another day.

If Duke Energy were to take no corrective action, the town would face the probability of unforeseen transmission outages that could easily take 10 hours to repair, as illustrative in the recent storm.  While there will be an impact on the economy, an unforeseen outage where the town is full of tourists would have a much more severe economic impact.

I want to thank Duke Energy for doing this very expensive work to improve service to one of its smallest wholesale customers.  Highlands' use of Duke power is about 2-tenths of one percent of their total output.  I appreciate that they are not overlooking the needs of this small mountain community.  Duke Energy continues to address infrastructure problems caused by Hurricane Helene.  This project is one part of their focus on upgrading their electric grid to continue providing reliable service.  I also thank them and the Highlands School for their flexibility in scheduling the work.