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 is planning on removing 28 trees in their right of way that pose a potential of falling and knocking out the transmission system feed power to Highlands. This work normally takes about three days. Working around such high-power lines in removing trees is and unacceptable danger to Duke workers. Duke will have to cut power to Highlands for about 10 hours. Normally a project of this size takes about 3 days using a normal staffing levels, 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 also.

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

Duke anticipates the work being done within the 10 hour period before power is fully restored. This projected schedule may be longer or shorter given the conditions and barring unforeseen circumstances.

The outage will impact town of Highlands 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. Townhall 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 on a generator system.

The work to be done is on the Duke Energy grid and they have made the decision concerning the date of the outage. They are having to stage about 100 personnel from various locations and equipment in order to do the tree removal as fast as possible. After February 26 Duke crews will continue to cleanup the tree removal areas while the power flows over head 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 Sunday and they would be impacted by a loss of power. Restaurants are open on Sunday also.

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

Another alternative posed was to work only 5 hours a day for two days to minimize the impact on businesses. The Duke folks state that amassing the personnel needed to do the job necessitates working for 10 hours for one day to complete the job. Also, getting personnel to work on Sunday’s 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 will be that areas of town will not have to lose power if that work was being done on another day.

If Duke Energy were to take no corrective action, the town would face a 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 with tourists would be a much more severe economic impact.

I want to thank Duke Energy for doing this very expensive work to improve service to one of it 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 and this project is one part of their focus to upgrade their electric grid in order to continue providing reliable service. I also thank them for their flexibility in scheduling the work.