

City Utility Street Cut Repairs



Objective

The objective of the audit was to determine whether:

- street cut repairs were completed in an effective and timely manner to minimize safety impacts to the public, and
- the current model is cost-effective.

Background

- Austin Water makes street cuts mostly due to water leaks or breaks in infrastructure. After they repair the infrastructure, they place a temporary patch on the street surface. The Public Works Department replaces these patches with permanent street cut repairs.
- Austin Water makes an average of 185 utility cuts per month, and Public Works makes an average of 89 permanent repairs per month.

What We Found

As of March 2016, there was a significant backlog of utility cut patches awaiting a permanent repair on Austin roads. It could take several years for the Public Works Department to address the backlog. Some of these patches may be unreliable and possibly unsafe. Ten randomly sampled patches were in place longer than 90 days, in violation of the City Code Standards Manual. The City relies on residents to report issues with patches, so Public Works is not aware of which or how many patches may be unsafe.

The backlog is likely a result of how the City allocates resources. Austin Water has 107 employees available to repair utilities under streets and place temporary patches, while Public Works has 53 employees to complete the permanent repairs. The lack of documented policies and procedures for performing street cut repairs may also cause inefficiencies in addressing the backlog.

Inconsistent and incomplete data on street cut work orders prevents the City from knowing the true size of the backlog of temporary utility cut patches or how cost-effective Public Works is at performing the repairs. As a result, the City cannot be sure that a street cut repair has been completed or that all repairs are accounted for, meaning that management cannot be sure the information they report or use for planning or resource allocation is accurate.

Public Works' cost data is incomplete and may not reflect actual labor and equipment expenses. As a result, Public Works cannot determine if their street cut repairs are cost-effective as compared with the City contractor's street cut repairs.

What We Recommend

The Public Works Department Director should:

- evaluate options for eliminating the backlog of utility cut repairs,
- develop, implement, and monitor written policies and procedures, and
- assess the cost-effectiveness of the Utility Excavation Repair activity.

The Austin Water Director should ensure temporary patches meet the requirements of the City Code Standards Manual.