

Technology spurs Southwest Gas project at Lake Tahoe

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New technology, federal tax breaks and lower construction costs combined to spur efforts by Southwest Gas to replace miles of vintage plastic pipe in its system at Lake Tahoe this year.

The Las Vegas-based utility is using two new technologies — “keyhole” and “split and pull” — in the Tahoe-area project.

With the keyhole technology, a 24-inch diameter piece of asphalt is cut to access the natural gas pipeline below the ground.

This eliminates the need to remove longer sections of roadway to replace older lines.

When the work is done, the keyhole of asphalt is replaced, using a durable adhesive.

The “split and pull” technology, meanwhile, splits the old pipe while pulling a new carrier pipe at the same time.

The company says the technology reduces disruptions to traffic and its customers and also reduces the amount of rehabilitation of pavement and landscaping in the areas where pipes are replaced.

The new technology, Southwest says, reduces both the cost as well as the carbon footprint of the reconstruction project.

The company also was spurred to undertake the pipe-replacement project by the availability of skilled construction trades workers who have been idled by the slowdown in residential and commercial construction. That helped reduce the costs of the project.

Southwest Gas uses a combination of its own employees and contractors on pipeline replacement projects. It focuses on Lake Tahoe projects during the spring and summer months — both to take advantage of snow-free working conditions and because of regulatory requirements.

It moves crews to lower-elevation locations during the winter, where they continue pipeline-replacement projects.

The company said federal tax incentives were a third element in its decision to undertake the Lake Tahoe project this summer.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and bonus depreciation tax relief available under federal legislation approved in 2010 provided incentives that encouraged the work to complete the Lake Tahoe project as quickly as possible.

The utility said the new pipelines should improve reliability of the delivery system around Lake Tahoe and will help meet new needs.