

A photograph of a street lighting pole on a sidewalk. The pole is mounted on a concrete base that has a large hole in it, revealing yellow insulation. Red and black wires are exposed and tangled on the ground. A black pipe is also visible on the ground. The background shows a paved road and some dry grass.

2026 Saint Paul Street Lighting & Wire Theft

Council Budget Committee Meeting: July 22, 2026



Wire Theft Key Points

- Significant public safety issue
- We continue to do a lot (e.g. repairs, trying new approaches)
- We are unable to keep up with the rate of wire theft (and re-theft) that is occurring
- Continuing safety frustration with residents (and staff) with dark lights across the city
- Requires an enterprise approach with other agency partners



Saint Paul Lighting Styles



King
Lantern



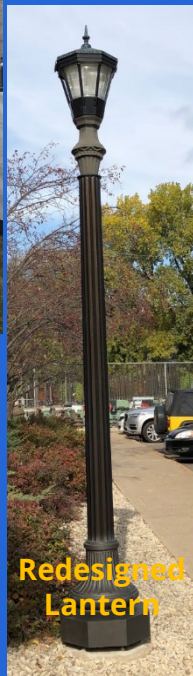
Large
Antique
Lantern



Side Mount
Holophane



Globe



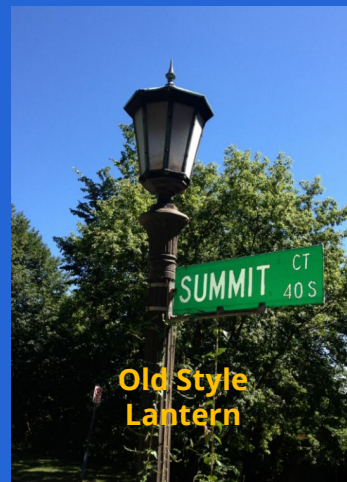
Redesigned
Lantern



Irvine
Park
Lantern



Sun
Valley
Lantern



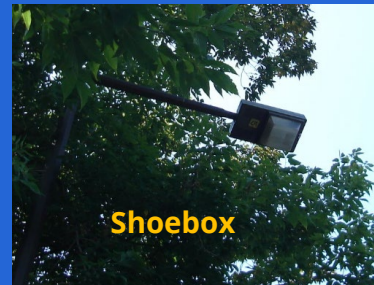
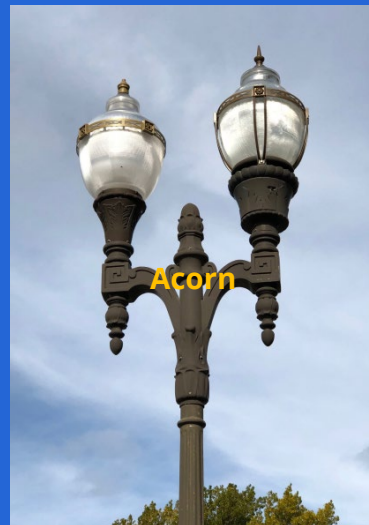
Old Style
Lantern



Cobra



Acorn



Shoebox



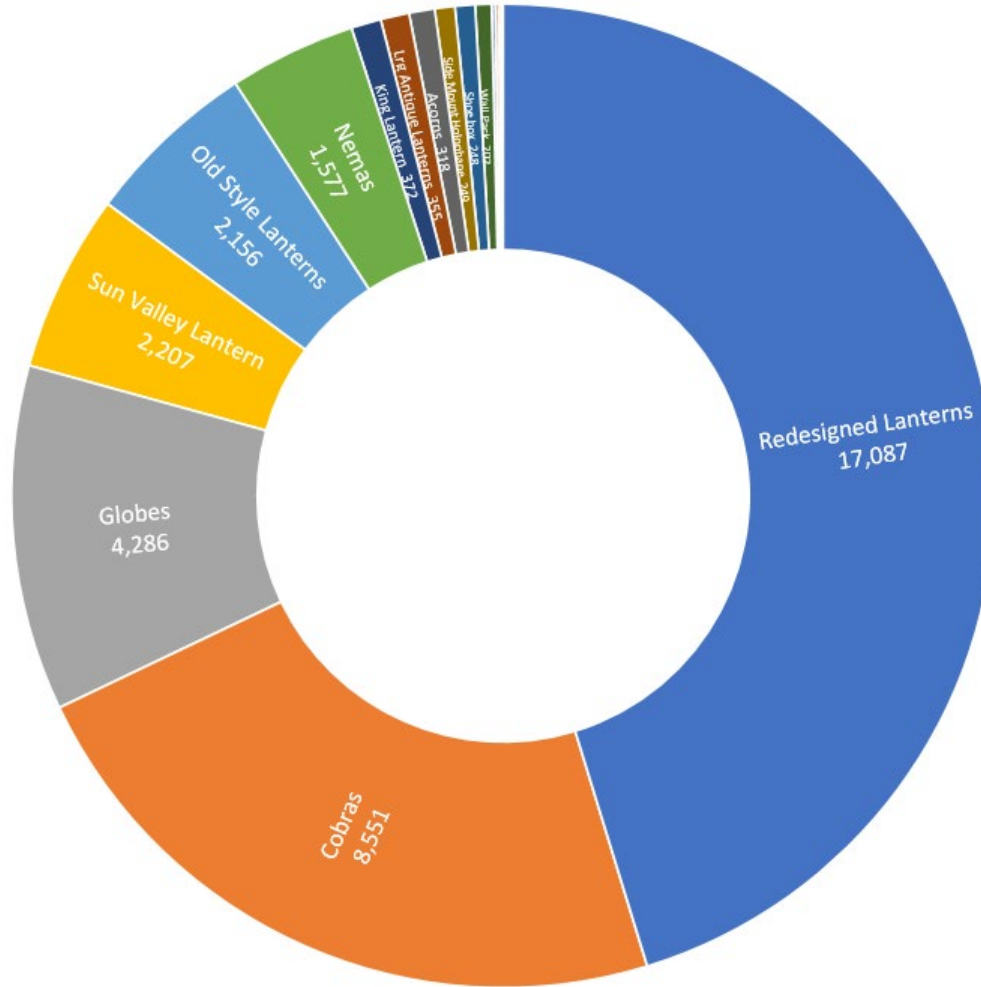
Saint Paul Street Lighting By the Numbers

City owns the
street lights

16 styles

38,463 street
lights

(2024)



STYLE	QTY
Redesigned Lanterns	17,087
Cobras	8,551
Globes	4,286
Sun Valley Lantern	2,207
Old Style Lanterns	2,156
Nemas	1,577
King Lantern	372
Lrg Antique Lanterns	355
Acorns	318
Side Mount Holophane	249
Shoe box	248
Wall Pack	202
Bollard	46
Western Style Lantern	43
Irvine Park Lanterns	31
Post Tops	22

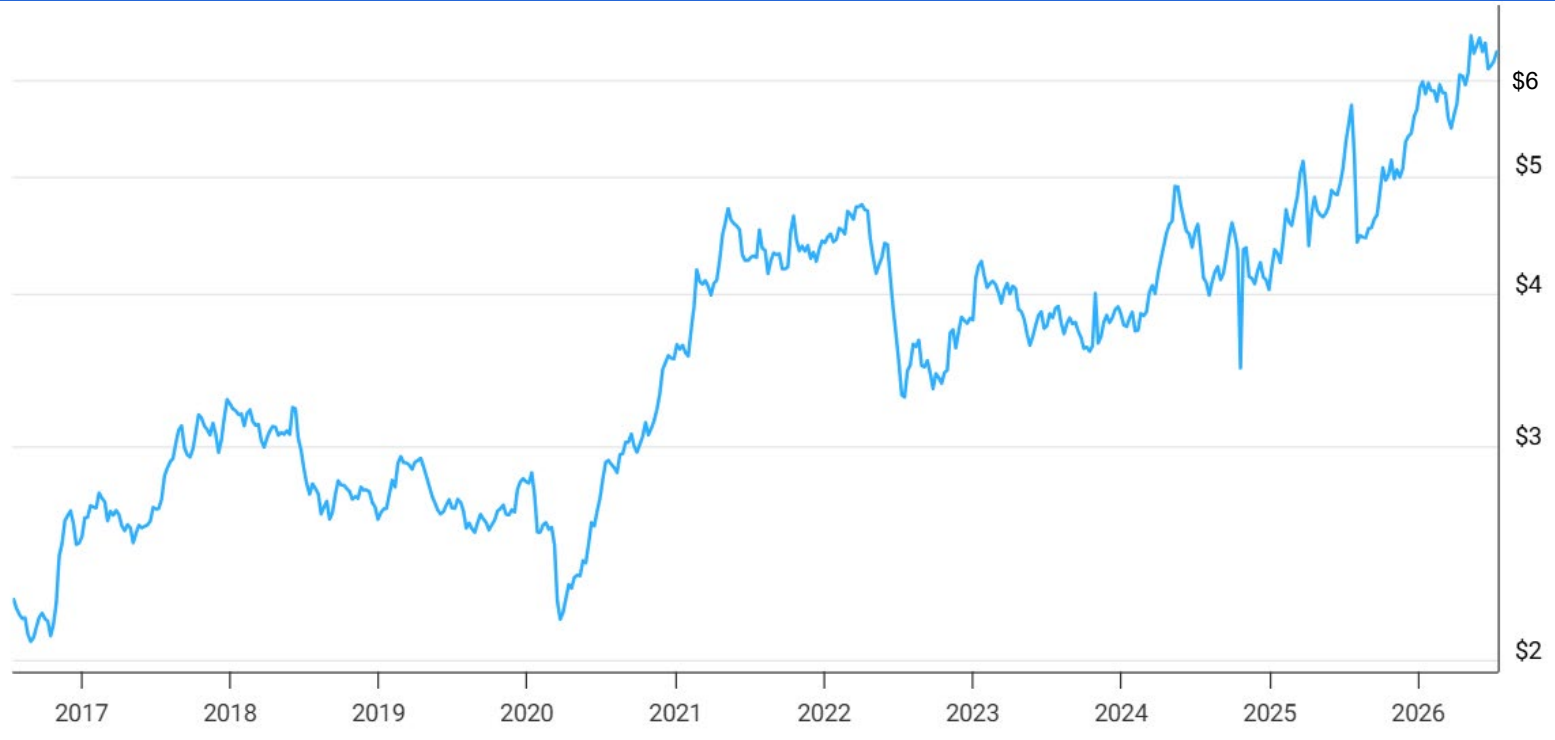


COPPER - What They Are After

- Copper is the goal (fiber optic cable has also been affected)
- Street light wire theft is predominant, but also signals, ground boxes, EV charging stations, utilities, private infrastructure
- Value of what they are stealing doesn't seem to be a big factor in deterring theft



Copper Prices – 10 Year History



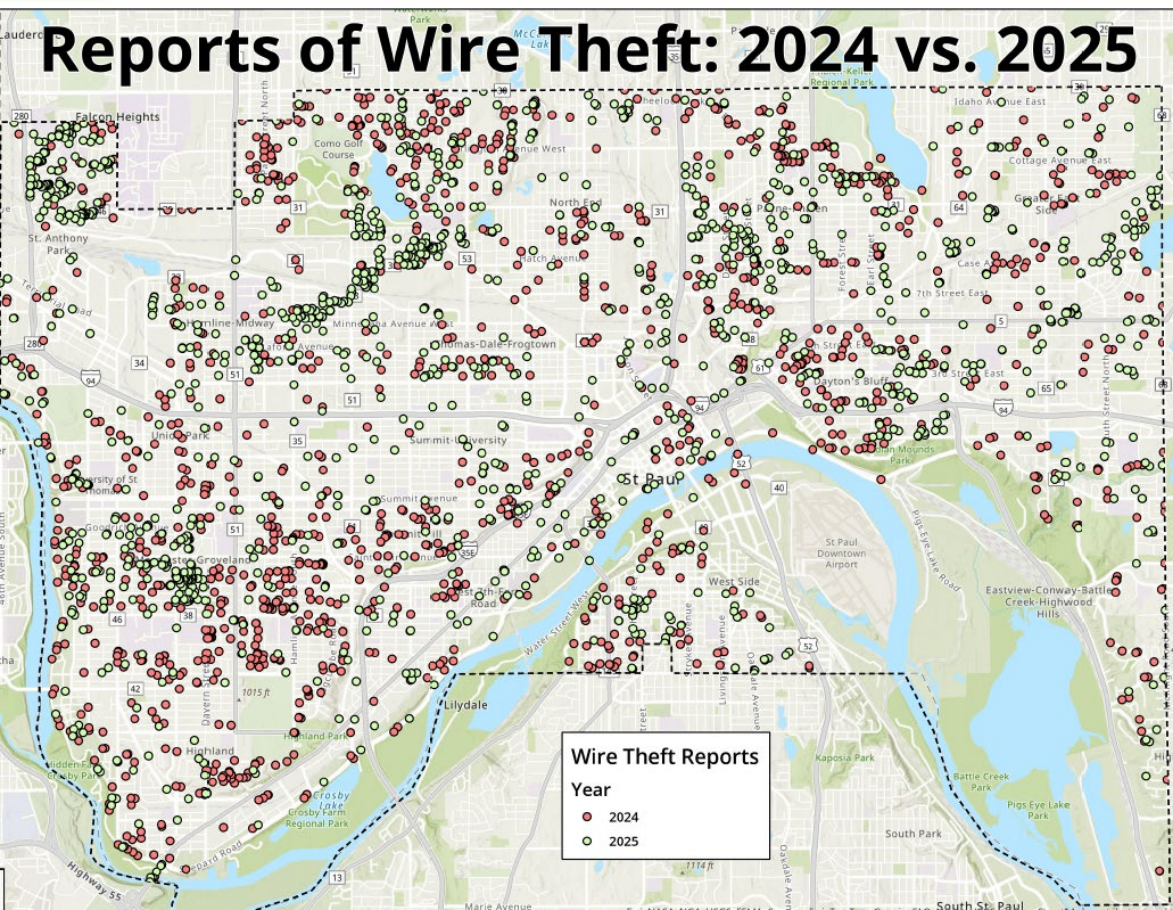
Source:
Macrotrends.net

Copper prices protected to rise -> \$9 per pound by 2028



Snapshot of Reported Wire Theft in Saint Paul

Reports of Wire Theft: 2024 vs. 2025



- Wire theft is a citywide issue
- Theft is outpacing our ability to repair
- Repeat theft occurring
- Residents and staff are frustrated

Year	Tickets (Wire Theft Related)
2024	1632
2025	1438
Jan 1-June 30, 2026	791



Current Situation

- Estimate that approximately 10% of the city's streetlights were dark as of December 2025 (~3,500). The number changes weekly and is now greater
- We believe the system was last fully functional (zero streetlights out) in December 2022
- With what is "dark" today – and no other theft – it would take all our electricians working full time for two years to get lights "turned on" – not necessarily fixing more damaged streetlights
- With no changes, it is estimated it could take at least 20 years to address current issues with current capacity and other required projects for electricians





Current Street Light Repair Process

1. Prioritizing new complaints and checking safety hazards

- Electricians check new complaints to make sure the street light fixtures are safe and/or to address any hazards.
- There may be wires sticking out, but not energized
- May not have time to put back on panels due to damages
 - Created plastic panel for safety, but now those also being stolen/recycled

2. Street light repair decisions involves multiple factors:

- Extent of damage, condition, age of fixture
- Condition of existing conduit infrastructure – is it possible to pull new wire without repairing underground conduit?
- Whether wire is missing or can be repaired through simple splicing
- History repeated theft at a given location
- Available budget, staffing, and materials
- Number of street lights out in an area
- Lights are on circuits – triage street lights to get as many on as possible
 - If additional damage or repairs needed, might need to skip street lights





Response to the Community

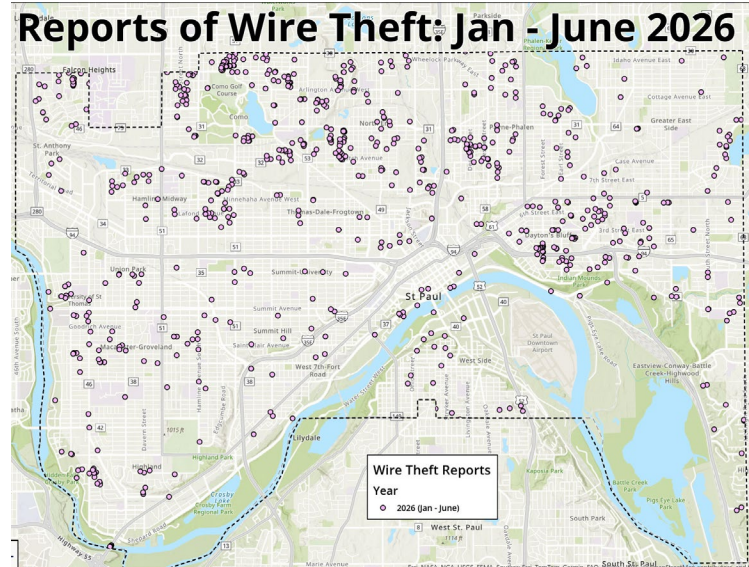
Multiple ways to report wire theft to city

- Receive dozens and dozens of reports daily, often repeated reports
- All reports sent to traffic operations for safety check and added to list
- Residents get general “received and response” message
- Report suspicious activity or recent wire theft to SPPD when know where and when occurred
- Share any available video footage with SPPD

Increased public frustration

- Wire theft continuing and quick re-theft of fixed lights
- Not able to get all lights back on (additional damages)
- Perception of “ignoring” issue/complaint
 - Not able to respond to all complaints, but they are being noted and addressed when possible
- Lights have been dark “a long time”

Cannot give timeline of when street lights to be fixed





What We Have Done...and Continue To Do

Theft Deterrent Strategies

- Reduced wire size
- Banding/welding doors
- Theft deterrent screws
- Daylight burning
- Conduit installation

Alternate Pole Designs

- Solar lighting pilot
- High access poles



Other

- Plastic base plates (safety)
- Meter replacement (electric cost)

Policy/Legal Support

- New copper legislation
- Testifying in court
- Copper wire theft now a felony

Enforcement Support

- City property ID on wire
- Theft monitoring device



Media and Public Coordination

- Complaint management
- Reporting wire theft
- Sharing any video of thefts with SPPD
- Website FAQs at www.stpaul.gov/streetlights



What We Have Learned

- Scalability is important – almost 40,000 lights
- Thieves are resourceful, innovative and determined
- Deterrents tend to have short effective window and cause more “leapfrogging” to other areas and neighborhoods
- Deterrents have negative impact on maintainability (increase maintenance costs)
- We can’t keep up – rate of theft is greater than resources to replace
- Higher copper wire costs equals greater replacement costs
- No silver bullet – but we continue to keep looking



Roll over image to zoom in

Happybuy Manual Wire Stripping Machine 0.06-0.98 inches, Wire Stripper Machine with Hand Crank Portable, Wire Stripping Tool Aluminum Construction, for Scrap Copper Recycling

Visit the Happybuy Store
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\$55⁹⁹

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Brand	Happybuy
Material	Stainless Steel
Color	Manual
Item Dimensions LxWxH	4 x 5 x 12.5 inches
Handle Material	Aluminum

About this item

- **Hand Crank Designed:** designed with hand cranks, easy to operate. Easily connects to drill for automatic wire stripping or use Handle for manual stripping.
- **Aluminum Alloy Material:** Manual wire stripper with high quality lightweight construction made of durable aluminum alloy. The blades have been fully guarded to ensure complete safety.
- **Recycle Your Copper:** Suitable for removing the plastic and rubber insulation from undamaged scrap wire. You can recycle your copper wire, benefit from non-insulated pure copper wire.
- **Easy to Use, Portable & Energy Saving:** There is adjustable blade and rollers on the cable wire stripping machine, smoothly and good for any shapes Cable. When you use this machine to strip the wire whose diameter smaller than 3mm, please put the wire to the small hole on bottom.
- **Wide Application:** This machine is automatic and the wire range is up to 25mm, widely used in wiring harness processing, aerospace wire processing, audio and data line processing, wire recycling dismantling and other industries.





2025 Fall Overtime Relighting Efforts

In Fall 2025, Public Works electricians performed volunteer overtime weekend work specifically focusing on wire theft

- 8 weekends
- 1,024 hours worked
- 38 circuits restored
- 550 street lights turned back on
- Circuits were restored in areas for all Council Wards
- Prioritization of street light fixtures, included:
 - could accept internal conduits
 - services dark for greater than 1 year
 - services that were identified to be immediately repairable
- Effort impacted labor, materials, and equipment costs – not sustainable





Funding History – Street Lights

- Due to a previous lawsuit, City can no longer charge street lighting fees
 - Funding transitioned to the General Fund
- In 2024, City Council approved additional one-time funding \$500,000 to support wire theft repair
 - Seasonal crew, materials, and enforcement efforts focused solely on wire theft
- Budget cuts in 2025, eliminated funding for one electrician, carried over to 2026 staffing budget
- No dedicated or special funding for wire theft repairs, replacement, materials or staffing
 - Have been using deferred maintenance
- Started exploring alternate funding sources (e.g. street light improvement district)



Wire Theft Replacement Spending*

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>PUBLIC WORKS</u>	<u>PARKS</u>
2018	-	\$116,000
2019	\$100,386	\$150,000
2020	\$104,600	\$72,000
2021	\$294,500	\$300,000
2022	\$453,200	\$298,000
2023	\$ 1.2M	
2024	\$ 2.1M	
2025	\$1M+	
2026	Data N/A	

* Represents spending, does not represent total existing need for repair and replacement. Not reflective of rate of theft and damages

Public Works spending on wire theft is not budgeted. It has utilized funding budgeted for maintenance. Regular maintenance is being deferred.



Wire Theft - Enterprise Approach

Saint Paul is continuously developing and deploying strategies to try deter wire theft, including:

- Repairing damaged street lights and other public infrastructure
- Exploring infrastructure changes where possible
- Raising public education and engagement efforts, encouraging report suspicious activity to 911
- Using law enforcement and prosecution strategies available; wire theft now a felony
- Collaborated with local and state officials to pass copper metal legislation to strengthen policies related to markets for selling stolen wire
- Exploring alternative funding options





Enforcement Strategies

The Saint Paul Police Department has been partnering with Public Works to build and implement copper wire theft determent strategies

- We are at a point that repair and replace is not a stand-alone strategy
- SPPD has been identifying technologies that may aid in identifying theft when it is occurring rather than after it has happened
- Key violations include:
 - Possession of theft/burglary tools
 - Criminal damage to property
 - Possession of stolen property



Legal Strategies

On January 1, 2025 new legislation:

- Requires any person who is selling copper metal to have a \$250 annual license issued by the state
- Persons licensed to perform trades work can sell copper metals with their existing valid license
- There are two dedicated days each year (the first Friday of April and October) that people without a license can sell copper metals to recyclers and earn up to \$25
- Allows residents and businesses to still recycle copper materials with scrap metal companies for free

As of January 2026, copper wire theft can now be prosecuted as a felony as it is considered critical infrastructure (e.g. sewers, electrical)

With support of city and county attorneys, arrests have gone to court with Public Works staff responding to subpoenas, providing restitution estimates as feasible, and testifying when necessary

Need more statewide focus on the sale/purchase of copper wire from scrap yards



Policy Strategies

- Legislative proposal in development to create street light improvement districts
- Are there ordinances or new legislation that can be strengthened around scrap-metal transactions and seller verification
- Can additional local and statewide resources be put towards limiting and enforcing the illegal purchasing of stolen wire with scrap yards/recyclers
- Pushing for greater prosecution penalties for wire theft with county attorneys
- Pushing for multi-jurisdictional approach
- Citywide priority for all departments





Community Strategies

- Report damaged/non-functional street light or report wire theft
 - **Public Works** (damaged/dark street light):
 - Online form at www.stpaul.gov/streetlights
 - Email: publicworksinfo@ci.stpaul.mn.us
 - 651-266-6100 (Public Works)
 - 651-266-8989 (City call center)
 - **SPPD** (report wire theft or share video footage):
 - 911 – if reporting active theft or suspect descriptions
 - 651-291-1111
 - File an online report ([Police | Saint Paul Minnesota](#))
- Public is frustrated. Dark street lights make neighborhoods feel less safe
- Public asked to share any reports or video of people “working” around street lights
- Keep house or garage lights on when possible
- More eyes watching city street lights is helpful to deter and catch thieves
- Responding to complaints, but not able to tell them when they will be repaired



Infrastructure Strategies

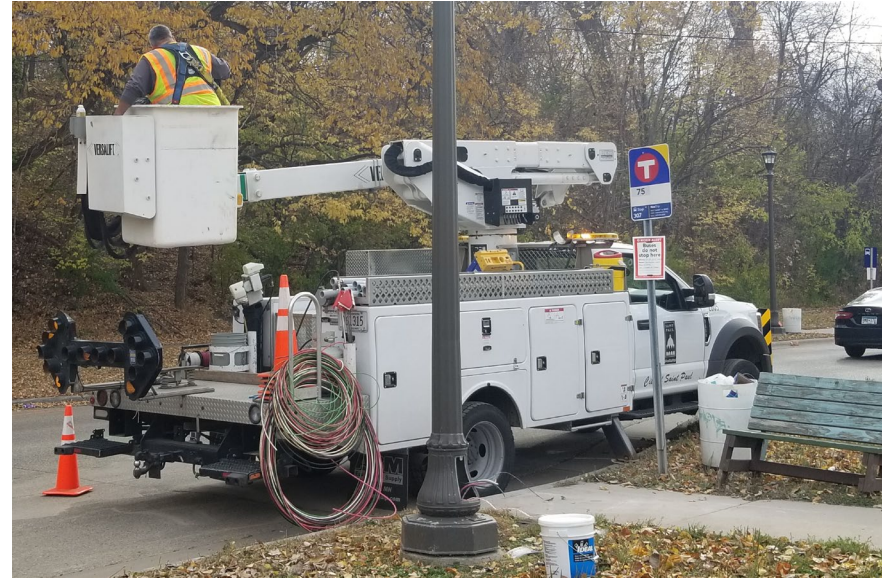
- Public Works and Parks continue to respond to complaints/notifications and work cross-departmentally to address theft concerns
- Continue to repair street lights as resources allow
 - No dedicated funding, using deferred maintenance funds
- Continue to try new theft deterrent strategies
- Safety at copper wire theft sites will continue to be prioritized
- We will continue to look at new strategies and technologies that limit wire theft, and consider the following:
 - Routine maintenance and repair
 - Scalability – solutions require significant time and funding





Wire Theft Summary

- Significant community and public safety issue
- We have tried numerous strategies and will continue to implement new tactics as funding and resources allow
- Our current approach is not sustainable. We are falling further behind and not meeting community expectations
- We need more resources and broader approach across the city, our jurisdictional partners and community members





Questions and Discussion

