



Bob Aaron bob@aaron.ca

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Residents heated up over transformer boxes

Walk down the streets of any reasonably new residential subdivision and every block or so you will come upon a large green metal box, three or four feet square. These are the hydro transformer boxes, installed to step down the high voltage electricity from transmission lines to the normal 110-volt household current.

Not everybody, it seems, is happy about having these things on their front lawns, but a little advance investigation at the time of signing a purchase agreement for a new home might indicate whether or not the green box will be in front of your home.

Chu and Ann signed an agreement to buy a new home in Mississauga last December. When they were in the builder's sales office, Chu wrote me recently, "we inquired about the location of the Hydro green box at the site and the sales rep informed us that they didn't know which lot would have the green box since their site map does not show any such thing."

In April of this year, they found out to their chagrin that their lot had a large hydro box, measuring about four feet by three feet and three feet high, on the front lawn.

"We would have lived with our bad luck," Chu wrote me, "had the box been located where it should normally have been placed (which is in the space between our house and our neighbour's house) but it does not."

The box is placed only 10 feet from the stairway leading to their front entrance door, partially blocking the entrance to the front door.

"We have made numerous attempts to contact the customer service personnel to complain about the awkward location of the box and were finally informed that there is nothing they could do except that they would plant some bushes to help hide the box."

Norm is another unhappy homeowner. His home is in a new subdivision in Burlington. During the negotiation of the purchase agreement, he and his wife inquired in the municipal offices about the location of all the municipal services, including telephone, cable TV, fire hydrants, community mailboxes, and hydro boxes. Even though the city could not give them the final locations of the hydro box and other services during the negotiation stage, their emotions took over and they bought the home anyway.

When it was nearing completion in late spring, Norm's worst fears were realized. He discovered that the hydro box had been placed in the worst possible place directly in front of the entrance to the house and less than six feet from the door.

Norm called the city of Burlington engineering department, and was told that when the city engineers are designing the plan for services for a subdivision, they are not informed what type of house the builder will later put on each lot. As a result, hydro boxes may be put in front of someone's front door.

Even if they're not close to the door, they often seem out of place when they're situated in the middle of the front lawn.

Susan had more success with her pre-purchase investigations. She bought a condominium townhouse in a new subdivision in Streetsville. Before the deal was firm, she managed to locate the Bell Canada facilities implementation coordinator, who confirmed that the hydro transformer and Bell Canada connection box pedestal would not be in front of her new home.

The City of Mississauga planning department offers advice to people concerned about placement of utility services. It has a brochure containing frequently asked questions about new residential subdivisions.

One of the questions answered in the brochure is "Will there be a hydro box, sidewalk, community mailbox or lamppost in front of my property?"

The brochure says that this information is available from either the developer of the subdivision, the builder of the new home, or the City's transportation and works department.

Susan's experience and the Mississauga brochure contain worthwhile lessons for purchasers of new homes. If hydro vaults, community mailboxes, lampposts, Bell Canada connection boxes or fire hydrants would concern you if located in front of your house, do your homework before signing any agreement.

If you are concerned about unwanted improvements near your front door, always have a lawyer review the purchase agreement in advance.

Bob Aaron is a Toronto real estate lawyer. He can be reached by e-mail at bob@aaron.ca, or fax 416-364-3818. Visit <http://www.aaron.ca>.