

Ask anyone who has ever hit a buried gas line or fiber optic cable: accuracy is not an academic question. It is the difference between a routine dig and a project that stops for days while lawyers, utility reps, and repair crews sort out the damage.

Ground penetrating radar, or GPR, is one of the main tools used for private utility locating in Orange County. It has a reputation for being high tech and highly accurate. That reputation is partly deserved and partly misunderstood.

What follows is a practical look at how accurate ground penetrating radar really is for utility locating in our region, what affects that accuracy, and when you still need other methods or a full utility locating team rather than a single piece of equipment.

First things first: what is utility locating?

Utility locating is the process of finding and marking buried utilities before you disturb the ground. That includes:

Public utilities, like street-side gas, water, power, and communication lines.

Private utilities, like service lines on private property past the meter, site lighting, private fire lines, irrigation, and sometimes even abandoned facilities.

When people ask, "What is utility locating?" they often think of the free 811 service. That is only half the picture.

In California, if you are going to dig, you are required by law to notify 811 so utility operators can locate their lines. This is not an optional courtesy. Is calling 811 the law in California? Yes. Failing to do so can expose you to fines and full liability if there is a line strike.

However, 811 is a public utility locating service. It covers what the utilities own, typically in the public right of way and up to your meter or service disconnect. Once the line crosses onto private property and becomes customer owned, it often falls outside their responsibility.

That leads to two crucial questions:

What does 811 not locate?

Does 811 locate private lines?

In practice, 811 locators generally do not mark:

- Customer owned electrical from the meter into a building
- Private fire lines beyond the city connection
- Private water, irrigation, and reclaimed water lines on a site
- Private gas after the service meter
- Most building drains, sanitary sewer laterals, and storm drains on private property
- Communication and data lines installed by or for the owner

This is why people ask, "Do I need a private utility locator?" If any of your critical work occurs on private property, and especially if it gets within a couple of feet of known or suspected lines, the answer is usually yes.

Public vs private utility locating in Orange County

The difference between public and private utility locating is not just who does the work. It affects accuracy, timing, and cost.

Public locating through 811 in California is free to the caller. When someone wonders, “Is utility locating free in California?” the accurate answer is this: the 811 request and the marks for utilities that participate in the One Call system are free. The cost is absorbed by the utility operators and ultimately ratepayers.

Private utility locating is not free. You hire a company directly, and they charge for their time, their equipment, and their expertise. This is where questions like “How much does utility locating cost in Orange County?” and “How much does private utility locating cost?” come into play.

Rates vary, but in Orange County you will commonly see:

- Trip or mobilization charges for small projects
- Hourly rates that could range from roughly \$200 to \$350 per hour for standard locating, with minimum charges
- Higher rates for subsurface utility engineering (SUE), engineering reports, or complex GPR mapping

Who pays for utility locating on private property? Typically the property owner, general contractor, or project owner. Some larger clients build this directly into their preconstruction budgets because they know the cost of a single hit on a major line can dwarf a week of utility locating.

Why accuracy matters so much before excavation

On a clean, vacant lot, you can sometimes see where the risks lie. In a developed part of Orange County, especially around older commercial and industrial zones, the ground is a layered time capsule of previous work: abandoned services, undocumented repairs, and utilities installed long before modern record keeping.

Utility locating is important before excavation because:

It prevents personal injury and fatalities from gas explosions or contact with high voltage lines.

It reduces the risk of power, water, or communication outages affecting businesses and residents. It protects your project schedule and budget.

People often ask, “Who is liable if I hit a utility line?” and “What happens if I cut a utility line?” In practice, if you dig without calling 811, and you skip reasonable steps like private utility locating when it is warranted, you are likely to carry most of the liability. Your insurance may not cover you fully if you did not follow good industry practice.

Repair costs range widely. Damaging a small PVC water line or irrigation main might cost a few hundred to a couple of thousand dollars, plus some lost time. Severing a fiber optic trunk or a medium pressure gas main can easily climb into the tens of thousands or more, with indirect costs like lost business far exceeding the direct repair.

Is it illegal to dig without calling 811 in California? The state’s Dig Safe laws effectively make that the case for most non-trivial digging. You are expected to notify 811 before using power tools or mechanized equipment for excavation.

The rule of thumb many contractors follow: it is far cheaper and safer to overdo locating than to explain a major utility hit.

How does utility locating work in practice?

Utility locating is not one technique. It is a toolbox. Ground penetrating radar is one tool among several.

On a typical private locate in Orange County, a technician will combine:

Electromagnetic (EM) locators. These detect the signal from a transmitter applied to a conductive utility, or from the utility's own current. They are the mainstay for most metallic pipes and cables.

Ground penetrating radar (GPR). This uses radar pulses to detect changes in material under the surface. It is especially useful when lines are non conductive, or when you suspect something that EM cannot see. Other aids such as sondes (traceable transmitters), CCTV crawlers inside sewer lines, and tracers inserted through access points.

Someone new to the process often asks, "What equipment do utility locators use?" The simple answer is that the best crews show up with a van full of equipment, then select the right combination based on site conditions, plans, and what they find in the field.

A responsible locator also reviews as built, plats, and any survey control available. That is where subsurface utility engineering, or SUE, comes in. SUE is a formal process that combines records, survey, locating technologies, and sometimes potholing to establish utility positions with known accuracy levels. For significant projects, an engineer may specify SUE Quality Level B or better to support design and risk management.

What is ground penetrating radar used for?

GPR is not only for utilities. It is used for scanning concrete slabs for rebar and post tension cables, mapping voids, locating underground storage tanks, and in geotechnical and archaeological work.

For utility locating, ground penetrating radar is used primarily to:

Detect non metallic utilities where EM may fail, such as PVC water lines, concrete storm drains, or clay sewer pipes.

Verify depth and alignment where EM data is uncertain or where multiple utilities are congested. Identify unknown objects, like buried foundations, abandoned tanks, or poorly documented lines.

ORANGE COUNTY UNDERGROUND UTILITY LOCATING

BESS
UTILITY SOLUTIONS



Bess Utility Solutions

2463 Tripaldi Way, Hayward, CA 94545
(408) 988-0101

<https://www.bessutilitysolutions.com/underground-locating-detection/>



You do not “see” a pipe directly on a GPR screen. You interpret hyperbolas and reflections that indicate a boundary between materials. That interpretation is where experience separates a good GPR operator from a technician just pushing a cart.

So how accurate is ground penetrating radar?

People want a simple number, like “within an inch,” but that is not how it works. The accuracy of ground penetrating radar for utility locating depends heavily on site conditions and operator skill.

In favorable Orange County conditions, such as dry, sandy soils or decomposed granite, with a reasonably shallow target and a clear surface, you can often achieve horizontal accuracy of roughly plus or minus 6 inches and vertical (depth) accuracy on the order of 10 to 15 percent of the depth.

For example, a plastic water line at 3 feet deep in good soil may be located so that the mark on the ground is within half a foot of the actual centerline, and the depth estimate might be in the range of 2.7 to 3.3 feet.

In more challenging conditions, accuracy can degrade significantly:

Clay rich or highly conductive soils attenuate the radar signal, reducing depth and clarity.

Wet ground after heavy irrigation or rain can blur reflections. Rebar, wire mesh, and dense utilities in the first couple of feet can cause clutter that obscures deeper targets.

In those cases, GPR might only detect larger utilities, might show them with poor definition, or might not see them at all beyond a certain depth.

This is why a seasoned locator will not promise that GPR will find every plastic pipe every time. A more honest statement is that GPR greatly improves the chances of detecting otherwise invisible utilities, but it does not

guarantee 100 percent coverage.

How deep can utility locators detect with GPR?

The question “How deep can utility locators detect?” has a different answer for GPR and EM.

With GPR in Orange County type soils:

Realistically, in an urban environment with mixed backfill and some moisture, useful GPR penetration for utility sized targets is often in the range of 4 to 8 feet.

In very favorable, dry, low conductivity sands, it might reach 10 to 12 feet or a bit more. In heavy clays or highly conductive fill, you might struggle to see more than 2 to 3 feet clearly.

The choice of antenna frequency matters. Higher frequency antennas (like 900 MHz) give better resolution but shallower depth, which is perfect for slab scans and shallow utilities. Lower frequency antennas (400 MHz, 270 MHz) see deeper, but with less detail.

Electromagnetic locators can sometimes trace a well bonded power cable or large metallic line to depths in the 10 to 15 foot range, provided access for signal injection is good and there is not too much interference.

The practical takeaway: for most day to day utility locating in Orange County, expectations for depth should focus on the first 6 to 8 feet, which is where the majority of buried utilities actually reside.

Can utility locators find plastic pipes and fiber optic cables?

This is where GPR earns its reputation.

Traditional EM locating relies on conductivity. A plastic water line or empty PVC conduit does not conduct electricity. Without a tracer wire or a conductive medium inside, EM tools cannot pick it up directly.

So, can utility locators find plastic pipes? Yes, but they usually need one of three things:

A tracer wire [Orange County Utility Potholing](#) alongside the pipe.

A conductive medium inside, like water with enough minerals or a pushed in traceable rod. GPR, with enough contrast between the pipe and the surrounding soil, and favorable soil conditions.

Similarly, when someone asks, “How do you locate a fiber optic cable?” the answer depends on how it was installed. Most telecom providers bury fiber in a conductive sheath or conduit with tracer wire, so EM tools can trace it. GPR can sometimes see the conduit as a non metallic anomaly, but it is usually a secondary method rather than the primary for fiber.

So, how accurate is ground penetrating radar for those plastic and non metallic lines? In good conditions, as noted earlier, you might see horizontal accuracy within several inches. In marginal conditions, you may only be able to say “there is something non metallic in this corridor at about this depth,” which still has value for risk management.

How accurate is utility locating as a whole?

The more complete and professional the locating approach, the more accurate the result. Utility locating accuracy is not just a function of technology. It is also about process, documentation, and verification.

On a carefully executed private locate in Orange County, mixing EM, GPR, record review, and spot potholing in critical areas, you can often achieve positional accuracy within a foot or better for most utilities, and better than that for critical ones that are exposed and surveyed.

On quick, low budget locates with limited tools, the marks can be off by several feet or more. Abandoned lines may be missed entirely. Depth estimates may not be reliable.

This is where subsurface utility engineering shines. With SUE, especially at Quality Level B (instrumented locate) and Quality Level A (test holes), the engineer can assign known horizontal and vertical accuracy ranges to each utility. That matters for design clearances, conflicts, and permitting.

Utility marking colors and what they mean

The first time a homeowner or new superintendent sees colored flags and paints all over their jobsite, they typically ask: "What do the utility marking colors mean?" or specifically, "What does red paint mean on the ground?" and "What do orange utility flags mean?"

Here is a quick reference for the standard color code used in California and much of the U.S.:

- White: Proposed excavation limits and reference marks. When you see white paint on the ground, it usually means someone outlined where they intend to dig.
- Red: Electric power lines, lighting cables, and related conduits. Red paint or flags are a warning to treat the area with extreme caution.
- Orange: Communication, alarm, signal lines, fiber optic, and cable TV. Those orange flags likely mark data or communication systems.
- Blue: Potable (drinking) water lines.
- Yellow: Gas, oil, steam, petroleum, or other gaseous materials.

Other colors exist, such as green for sewers and drain lines, and purple for reclaimed water, but red and orange are the ones that tend to raise the most concern because they relate to power and communications.

How long does utility locating take, and when should you call?

Two separate questions come up a lot: "How long does utility locating take?" and "How far in advance do you need to call before digging?"

For public locating, California law generally requires that you notify 811 at least two working days before excavation, not counting the day you call. In practice, many contractors build in three to four business days to give some buffer.

For private utility locating in Orange County:

Simple residential jobs might take 1 to 3 hours on site.

Moderate commercial sites may require a half day to a full day. Complex industrial campuses or SUE level work can span multiple days, especially if potholing and survey are involved.

Schedule lead time depends on the company and season. During busy periods, you may want to call a week or more in advance, particularly if your dates are fixed.

The safe practice for any significant excavation is to schedule both: call 811 first, then engage a private locator for the private side. That way, you are not waiting on one while the other is already on site.

Locating specific lines: water, gas, sewer, septic, and electrical

Each utility behaves a little differently in the ground, so the techniques vary.

When someone asks, “How do you locate a buried water line?” the first step is to identify whether it is metallic or non metallic, and whether it has tracer wire. For metallic services, EM is usually the primary tool, with GPR as a backup in tricky conditions. For non metallic water lines, GPR, hydrant sounding, and, if possible, inserting a traceable rod or transmitter are common approaches.

For gas, the question “How do you locate a buried gas line?” ties directly into safety. Most gas mains and services have tracer wire or are metallic, so EM locating is standard. GPR can support where needed. Given the risk, good locators are conservative about their marks and clear about uncertainty.

Sewer lines and storm drains raise their own questions: “How do you locate a sewer line?” and “Can you locate a septic tank?” For sewers, especially laterals and non metallic pipes, a typical approach is to send a sonded camera or rod from a cleanout or manhole and then trace the signal at the surface with an EM receiver. GPR can help detect larger non metallic pipes or voids. Septic tanks can sometimes be seen as distinct large anomalies on GPR in favorable conditions, or located via probing, records, and experience.

For electrical, “How do you find a buried electrical line?” usually starts with EM, because energized lines generate detectable fields. When lines are de energized or in complex duct banks, the locator may apply a signal directly and supplement with GPR to sort out depth and separation from nearby utilities.

Can I locate my own underground utilities?

Homeowners and smaller contractors often ask, “Can I locate my own underground utilities?” and “How do I find underground utilities on my property?”

There are basic steps you can take:

Call 811 and get the public utilities marked. That is non negotiable.

Review any as built drawings and plot plans you have for the property. Walk the site and connect visible features like meters, cleanouts, and utility boxes with likely underground paths.

There are also consumer grade locators on the market and rental GPR units, but utility locating is not just about owning the equipment. Misinterpreting signals or GPR data can be worse than not looking at all, because it gives a false sense of security.

For low risk work like shallow hand digging in an area far from known utilities, careful self assessment may be reasonable. For anything near power, gas, or critical communications, or for machine excavation, homeowners should strongly consider hiring a professional utility locator.

The question “Should homeowners hire a utility locator?” really comes down to risk tolerance. If the cost of a line strike, injury, or service outage would be severe relative to the cost of a few hours of professional locating, the answer is usually yes.

Do I need a permit to dig in Orange County, and who do I call?

Whether you need a permit to dig in Orange County depends on the scope and location. Simple landscaping and shallow digging on private property may not require a permit, while trenching in the street or right of way almost certainly will, often from the city, county, or Caltrans.

Regardless of permits, the general sequence looks like this:

- Call 811 to have public utilities located for free.
- Engage a private utility locating company for anything beyond the public side, especially on commercial or industrial property.
- Coordinate with the local building or public works department to determine permit requirements that apply to your specific project.

When people ask, “Who do I call before digging in Orange County?” the safest short answer is: call 811 first, then call a reputable private locator if any work is on private land or close to facilities not clearly marked by 811.

Choosing a utility locating company, and where GPR fits in

It is common to hear, “What is the best utility locating company in Orange County?” The honest answer is that “best” depends on your project type, risk level, and schedule.

When evaluating providers, focus on:

Experience in your particular type of work, such as residential, commercial, industrial, or municipal.

Whether they bring both EM and GPR to the job, and are comfortable explaining when each is appropriate. Their approach to documenting findings, including sketches, CAD files, or GIS data if you need it. How they talk about limitations and uncertainty. A good locator is clear that GPR has constraints and that no locate is perfect.

GPR should be part of the conversation, but not the entire conversation. A company that sells GPR as a magic solution that can see everything, everywhere, is not being realistic.

When a private locator with GPR is worth the cost

The decision to hire a private locator, and to insist on GPR as part of their toolkit, comes down to a few recurring situations:

- You are digging on private commercial or industrial property with a history of modifications, especially where plastic or concrete utilities are likely.
- You are planning deep excavations, caissons, or shoring near existing buildings and need to understand utilities down to significant depths.
- There are known gaps in records or conflicting as builts, and you cannot afford a surprise.
- You are working near high value utilities such as main fiber routes, major power feeds, or critical gas mains.

In these cases, the added clarity from combining EM and GPR, interpreted by an experienced locator, usually pays for itself in reduced risk.

If you are only planting a few shrubs several feet from any known services, or hand digging a shallow trench that stays away from marked utilities, full scale private locating might be excessive. Context is everything.

The bottom line on GPR accuracy in Orange County

Ground penetrating radar is a powerful tool for utility locating, especially for non metallic utilities that EM locators cannot see. In the sandy and mixed soils found across much of Orange County, GPR often performs well, with horizontal accuracy on the order of several inches and reasonable depth estimates for utilities in the first several feet.

However, GPR is not infallible. Its accuracy drops in conductive or wet soils, in highly congested zones, and with deeper or smaller targets. It also depends heavily on the operator's experience and their ability to correlate GPR results with EM data, records, and surface evidence.

If you treat GPR as one part of a complete utility locating strategy, rather than a silver bullet, it significantly improves your chances of avoiding costly and dangerous surprises underground. Paired with mandatory [Orange County Utility Locating](#) 811 notification, thoughtful planning, and, when warranted, subsurface utility engineering, it becomes a key component of safe and successful excavation in Orange County.