



## *A View From the Underspace*

# \*Do We Really Know What's Below?

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**T**aking a look at the Call 811 website ([www.call811.com](http://www.call811.com)) leaves little doubt that the nation's homeowners are a major target of the 811 campaign. We've seen a lot of emphasis on the 811 tagline, "Know what's below. Call before you dig." But I wonder if the 811 tagline needs an asterisk? **Know what's below\***. **Call before you dig.**

\*Except for water and sewer lines

Ownership of these lines is the issue. Most utility owners are not going to mark what they do not own. But how many homeowners are surprised to learn that they own their water and sewer lines? About the same percentage of *Underground Focus* readers that are surprised to find out that our nation's largest city is not a member of one-call, I reckon.

A while back, I read a quote attributed to the CEO of a large national utility contracting firm that proclaimed unmarked sewer laterals represent the "biggest safety risk to contractors and the general public." My question is this: How many utility contracting firms locate sewer laterals before utilizing directional drilling? Or locate water services? There are many utility contractors that do—or hire locators to do the work—but I wonder exactly how many?

Naturally, some utility company damage prevention professionals cringe when they think of excavators utilizing locating

instruments. And they have experiences that justify the cringing. But it's impossible to argue that one-call does it all. The issue of line ownership separates what is and what is not marked as a result of excavators calling one-call.

For the most part, state laws require that utilities belong to one-call and subsequently mark their utilities when requested. Our damage prevention model in the United States is four decades old and deeply entrenched. But, if you want to see a different model, you don't have to travel very far. Vancouver excavators locate their own utilities. The gas, power and telecommunications utilities supply professional and municipal excavators with facility maps. Homeowners in Vancouver calling one-call receive a faxed or mailed diagram of utility locations within their yard. My, that is different. We don't do things that way.

In recent years, I've concluded that there are two reasons why one would utilize a locating instrument. Reason 1 is to find the route of a single utility between two points, and Reason 2 is to find locations under which no utility exists. If you can think of another reason to use a locating instrument, please let me know.

The work done for our U.S. one-call model is all Reason 1 while the Vancouver model

incorporates both Reason 1 and Reason 2. With regards to damage prevention, I'm not about to sing the virtues of one system over the other. But doesn't Subsurface Utility Engineering—which receives huge accolades from damage prevention professionals—really rely on locating for Reason 2? And wouldn't you say that most excavators want to know where utilities aren't instead of where they are? How are they going to know where utilities aren't if some of the underground utilities are not located after calling one-call?

Fortunately for the damage prevention professionals that cringe when they think of excavators using locators, I doubt many professional excavators see locating as one of their responsibilities—our laws dictate that it be done by the utilities. But because of things such as the absence of sewer and water laterals locates, I think you'll see a lot more excavators paying to get locates performed.

Imagine, paying for something that's free? Hey, if enough contractors start paying for locates.... **UF**