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We Are Here to Preserve Disorder

Since this is the second column of the year, we turn our attention to the second element of the federal government's definition of "effective state damage prevention programs." This definition is found in the PIPES Act of 2006.

"An effective damage prevention program includes a process for fostering and ensuring the support and partnership of stakeholders, including excavators, operators, locators, designers and local government in all phases of the program," says element number two. Furthermore, element two figures that "improving a state's damage prevention program could well involve changes in processes and procedures affecting the way specific damage prevention stakeholders interact and conduct business."

In the U.S., there is one yet-to-be tackled damage prevention project that would make marriage partners out of stakeholders. This project would create quantum change in the way stakeholders interact and conduct business, too. What's the project? Consolidated utility maps.

A consolidated utility map places underground utility location information for all utilities in a given area on a single map. Who benefits from consolidated utility maps? Why it'd be none other than locators, designers, local government and the largest group of excavators in our nation—the utility operators and their contractors.

A View From the Underspace

But how do you go about creating consolidated utility maps? It's quite simple, really. Here are the steps:

- 1) Utilities agree to use a shared and common roadmap to plot their location information.
- 2) Each utility transfers their utility location data to their copy of the roadmap.
- 3) A shared central mapping department compiles all of the location data from the utilities' copies of the roadmap and places that data on a single roadmap.

What is the major benefit of a consolidated utility map? It gives locators, designers, government and utility company excavators the "on demand" ability to instantly visualize what's underground and where it can be expected to be found. What results from instant visualization? Better decisions made quicker.

I recently received this e-mail from a second year MBA student at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, "As part of my coursework, I am currently doing research in the infrastructure industry, specifically about detection, maintenance, installation and remediation of underground infrastructure in United States. I have come across information about how location and mapping technologies have evolved over the past several years and how a consolidated mapping system with information from all utility companies would help prevent unintentional excavation damage. In addition, I was intrigued by the mapping systems available in Japan and certain parts of Canada."

I am unable to present a compelling business argument supporting the notion that consolidated utility maps will actually save utilities money. But we spend a lot of money utilizing a one-call process which produces a lot of information, most of it temporary and disposable. I will pursue the business angle with my Wharton acquaintance. It seems that

he is not alone in this endeavor and that gives me hope that we may soon see some fresh perspectives in damage prevention.

But a business argument will not be enough to spur this level of change in our industry. There is the necessary social argument which I suspect will be much tougher to win. You see, we typically do not share permanent information about underground utility location unless it is mandated by the owner of the publicly owned right-of-way. Stakeholder partnering is unlikely to lead to enthusiastic sharing of permanent information. We don't do it that way.

Most utility-related operations demand order. There is clear desire for order when it comes to individual utilities wanting to know where their utility is located underground. But when it comes to finding out where other utilities are located underground, we seem to be comfortable with disorder. We have no idea where the other guy is located and when we need to know, we ask the other guy for temporary information that is discarded after use. When we need the same information again, we repeat the same process. When something goes wrong, we say we didn't know.

Do we really want to change "the way specific damage prevention stakeholders interact and conduct business?" If so, we'd demand order. We'd enthusiastically share our utility location data with other utilities resulting in the creation of a system that produces and maintains consolidated utility maps. For this would create order and logically reduce avoidable damages to underground pipes and cables. It'd probably save a lot of money in a lot of other ways, too. Better decisions made quicker.

Using the words of the late Mayor Daley seems appropriate to summarize some of our damage prevention philosophy, "We are not here to create disorder. We are here to preserve disorder." **UF**