

# VIEW, TOO

A Column Dedicated to Tracking Business Ethics in Damage Prevention

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I've heard that secret, underground communications cables running from the White House to missile launch pads out West pass very close to my house. OK. Maybe this is true and maybe it isn't. But if it's true, why do I know about it?

Just how would you build a secret underground communications system and keep it a secret anyway? Build a pipeline across the country, wait for all the construction workers to go home and slip a covert network of cables through the pipe? You could even place pipeline markers along the entire route and build the occasional compressor station. There you go, hidden in plain view.

Clandestine for another reason, a 1960s Chicago construction crew installing fire alarm cables performed this "cable-in-pipe" trick. The weeklong trenching and tunneling job dramatically shifted gears with the discovery of an abandoned water main paralleling the proposed cable route. No less surprising than what the crew did with their free time that week, time sheets showed the job still took a week and as-built records made no mention of the abandoned water line.

Let's go back to those secret communication cables. Think there's a map showing where the cables are located? Sure, there's a top-secret map for those cables somewhere. But, you will never see them because the maps are top-secret.

Secret cables aside, it's appropriate for this column to have a lengthy discussion about utility maps, the information they contain, their role in damage prevention, and perhaps most importantly, the business ethics surrounding who should have access to utility mapping information. This column can only start the discussion.

There are only two reasons given as to why utility mapping information is generally kept under lock and key: system security and competitive advantage. System security issues are of great concern to utilities, and rightfully so. Mapping information may assist those who are intent on causing harm to our government, institutions or people. Utility customers

have security concerns. The utility must protect their customers' security, too. Competitive issues may be limited to telecommunications, but not limited to traditional telecommunications companies. Today, every municipality and utility could potentially offer telecommunication services.

Are we doing American damage prevention an injustice by ignoring mapping information-sharing initiatives used successfully in other countries; countries that have the same utility security and competition worries? By no means am I suggesting that other countries have superior damage prevention results. We have the most developed and proven system anywhere. But it's not perfect because pipes and cables get hit with regularity. So how do we make our system better?

There are only three tools used to find the location of underground utilities from the surface: visual observation, instrumentation and mapping information. Visual observation skills reflect one's knowledge and experience, but are driven mostly by attitude and desire. New instruments for the detection of underground utilities are likely decades away. Mapping information already exists. Making it readily available to excavators will reduce damages. Imagine being able to plan an excavation in advance of arriving onsite. Paint and flags have obvious value, but if maps are important to the locator, could they not be just as important to the excavator?

Here's what it's like obtaining utility mapping information before arriving onsite. (see below) Suppose you're drilling a new gas main on the public right-of-way on the north side of the street. And let's further assume that the municipality where the job takes place does not locate sewer laterals for excavators. This municipality, however, has sewer lateral locations mapped and makes the location information available on the Internet. Here's the as-built information you could print out and take to the field.

The neat thing about this map is that it is real. I downloaded it just before I started writing this column. I spent several hours learning how to navigate the online mapping system. I feel fairly confident that I have mastered the art of getting municipal utility mapping information for a city of nearly 500,000 residents. I have no doubt that any of our readers could do the same, too. **UF**

*Publisher's note: View, Too will continue to explore the subject of utility mapping information in upcoming issues. Any comments may be directed to [mike@underspace.com](mailto:mike@underspace.com)*

