

## A Century of No Progress

**I**s designating utilities the most important part of damage prevention? Yes. Its importance dwarfs the sum of all other damage prevention components. No matter how you slice it, unless someone goes into the field and puts down paint and flags within the dig area, there's not a whole lot of damage prevention going on, is there? So our industry funnels a lot of money into initiatives that will provide for more and better utility designating, right? Nothing could be further from the truth.

Let me back up a bit. I'll probably encounter some friction for the "most important part of damage prevention" bit so I owe it to you to explain my position. Let's look at two hypothetical situations. In the first scenario, the upstream side stays exactly the same as it is today with one exception: no person is dispatched to the field. The utilities still get the dig ticket, but respond by sending their maps to the excavator. The mapping information is specific to the dig area and the excavator relies solely on the mapping information to avoid damaging utilities.

In the second scenario, there is no upstream side. No one-call, no ticket, no maps. Just the excavator who has an employee that is extremely adept with pipe and cable locating equipment: electromagnetic instruments, ground penetrating radar (GPR) and vacuum excavation rigs. The employee uses skill and visual observation to avoid damaging utilities.

So, which one of the two scenarios do you think would result in fewer damages? If you say the mapping scenario, I could see myself agreeing with you if two conditions were met: the excavator was supplied with highly accurate GPS utility location data and the ex-

cavator utilized an equally accurate GPS device in the field to mark out the buried pipes and cables. If you say the excavator/locating scenario, I can see myself agreeing with you because I know what is possible with highly trained personnel proficient at instrument use and visual observation. But I know of no person who can do this task just as well without mapping information as they can with mapping information.

Most utilities do not possess a high pedigree of buried utility location information. Nor do they show much interest in gathering highly accurate buried utility location information when they have the opportunity to do it—during maintenance or installation activity. In addition, most utilities do not show much interest in giving excavators their utility mapping information. That's why our damage prevention system depends so heavily on field designation.

What is field designation? A technician working on behalf of the utility company is dispatched to the dig area. Once there, the technician uses an electromagnetic pipe and cable locating instrument, along with utility maps and visual observation, in order to put down paint and flags for the excavator. What if the buried utility is not metallic? Well, in virtually all cases, the technician is reduced to using just mapping information and visual observation. There is not much GPR used to clear one-call tickets. Don't believe it? Well ask the GPR manufacturing companies how many instruments they have sold to the three or four big contract locating companies for use in clearing one-call tickets. Not many. Their utility customers don't insist on it.

Now, suppose we combined our two hypothetical scenarios. It's easy to do by just giving your imagination a bit of a workout. Can you see it? No field technician is dispatched by the utilities because the excavator employs the technician. The excavator gets the needed utility maps by notifying the one-call center of the dig area. Would this scenario still rely on the designating of utilities? Of

course it would. Can you imagine a process whereby the excavator can access the utility mapping information without contacting a one-call center? You should because that's how it works today. Mapping doesn't come from the one-call centers it comes from the utilities themselves. But I cannot imagine doing without the field designation of utilities because precise utility location information does not exist. That is why I consider designating utilities to be the most important part of damage prevention.

So what's changed since 1948 when it comes to marking utilities? Sad to say, not much has changed. Sure, flags replaced wooden stakes and locating instruments have more antennas and a wider selection of frequencies, but there's no real change in the field designating side—the most important part of damage prevention—in sixty years. It's all been on the upstream and downstream side of the actual placing of marks in the field. A ton of money has been spent getting the information to the field technician. A ton of money has also been spent on the documentation of the field work. Lord knows we've spent a ton on claims, but the most important part of damage prevention has remained unsullied by investment, financial or otherwise.

I marvel at the thought that technicians will be schlepping paint and flags at dig sites in 2048. But at the pace we're going, that's exactly what will happen. It will be a century of no progress. This article suggests two things we could do differently, but both would require a significant cultural change in damage prevention. And you know what? The Georgia Department of Transportation certified locator program, where excavators are responsible for the designation of buried lines, and Phase II of the Virginia Pilot Project, where field technicians capture location data, are attempting to shake up our culture. When it comes to business ethics in damage prevention, I can't think of better examples. Imagine, people making investments in the most important part of damage prevention. **UF**