

# Just One More Question

BY ALLEN GRAY



Excavating in our congested rights-of-way is difficult and fraught with peril on many fronts. Dealing with myriad hazards associated with utility construction requires a comprehensive overall safety program addressing everything from trench safety to confined space. Most safety precautions are straight forward and definitive in mitigating the dangers associated within any given circumstance. However, there is one area that not only requires set precautions, but also requires constant attention, improvisation and engagement – underground utility safety and damage prevention... also known as the 811 process.

Contending with existing facilities during excavation activities requires methods and processes that go beyond simply calling 811, waiting on facility owner/operators to mark their facilities and digging safely.

Before accepting a project, it is important for construction contractors to know exactly what the scope, conditions and details of the project are. Particularly, when the project requires excavating in the vicinity of existing facilities on complex projects.

Beyond determining basic issues such as insurance requirements, liquidated and consequential damage clauses, good company fit, resource availability, and bonding requirements, there are underground utility safety and damage prevention issues the contractor should determine in advance of accepting a project. These items can be addressed in pre-bid meetings with the parties involved in a project from conception through reseeding present. Usually these parties include the project owner(s), design team and supporting entities. Addressing issues associated with complex projects should always start under the direction of the project owner in the planning stage.

A good place to start is to determine whether the project owner and design team are going to identify existing utilities on project plans and documents. Common Ground Alliance Best Practices include a chapter dedicated to Planning and Design. When followed, the Best Practices in this chapter go a long way to enhancing safety

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and helping ensure the project will proceed expeditiously with little delay from dealing with unknown existing utilities.

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stage, through subsurface utility engineering and other methods, it allows the designers to choose the path of least resistance for excavation activities. It also allows contractors to properly prepare for those conflicts accordingly, well in advance of commencing excavation activities. In addition to enhancing safety this can save substantial costs throughout the life of the project. Instead of waiting until 3 days before excavation activities begin to know utility conflicts, addressing these issues on the front-end well in advance of commencing

excavation activities benefits all parties.

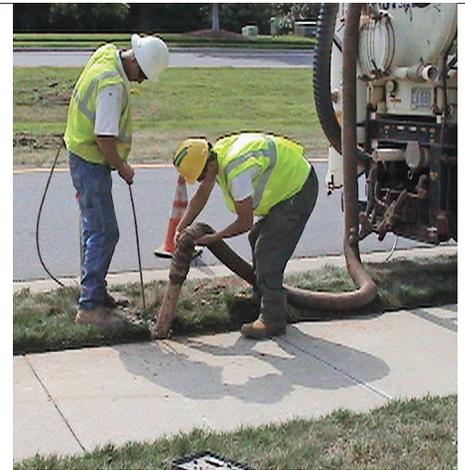
Some call centers offer complex project services where the project owners, designers and excavators work together from a single project management system to plan and coordinate damage prevention efforts. It is important to know if the local call center provides this service and the project owner will use it. Complex project services allow for enhance coordination and communication among all stakeholders, which is critical on projects



employing multiple contractors with multiple locate requests.

Among the many benefits of using complex project services is situational awareness among all stakeholders in the process. From project managers to the personnel in the field, safety and damage prevention awareness is integral to the project and all those involved in the project. The complex project service makes all facility owner/operators with facilities in the vicinity of excavation aware of the project circumstances, deadlines and scheduled activities. Owner/operators can plan their locating activities in concert with the project progress, helping them assign resources as absolutely necessary. This benefits all parties and helps avoid the pitfalls realized when a damage occurs.

These efforts go beyond the basic damage prevention process of submitting a locate request to a call center just a few days before commencing excavation activities. Coordination and communication between all parties helps to ensure public/workforce safety and help ensure the integrity of vital facilities. With the owners recognizing the



importance of a robust project-wide utility safety and damage prevention program on the front end of a project all parties benefit. Particularly, project owners who save when damages are avoided along with the burdensome follow-ups to responding to damages.

In the absence of complex project services being provided by the local call center it's important to know the project owner and designers are going to be active partners in the damage prevention process. Ask whether the project owner and designers are committed to addressing the safety and damage prevention elements of the project they can best take responsible for in the design stage. This includes determining utility owner/operators affected by the project and seeking information on the placement of those facilities. Many facility owner/operators will provide this information through the local call center or directly to a designer.

The bottom line is underground utility safety and damage prevention is a “shared responsibility,” as set forth by the Common Ground Alliance. Leaving the matter to one stakeholder or another only invites damages, compromises safety and threatens vital services. One of the best things an excavator can do to help enhance safety and keep damages to an ultimate minimum is to advocate for coordination and communication among all stakeholders and educate all, especially project owners, on the importance of working together. There are several means to accomplish this through local utility coordinating committees, call centers, regional Common Ground Alliance groups, and others. **ESB**

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