



Homeland

Security

and Your Right of Way

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The events of September 11 touched each of us in a special way. It was an extremely visible broadcast of our vulnerability to desperate acts by terrorists. As great of an impact as the combined four acts were, public works personnel are faced with a similar, albeit not as widely publicized threat every day. Cities across the country, with their vast transportation networks and associated infrastructure in the public right of way are ripe for the taking.

Everyday, each of us relies on some thing or service that has been brought to use via the public's right of way. Whether it's the water we drink, the power for our conveniences or our mode of travel, we all use right of way in one form or another. Any disruption of this network of service can mean everything from a minor inconvenience on our way to work by a maintenance crew to a tragic incident that takes innocent lives.

Yet every day we have licensed contractors working on our rights of way performing infrastructure installation or maintenance. Most of them have contacted an underground utility locator service to aid in the detection of the location of underground facilities. Some of them have notified the local road agency for permission to work in the right of way, and a few manage to make positive contact with a conduit to disrupt service.

For those road agencies that do not have a proactive permitting program for right of way management, the field is open for unauthorized entry from the underground world. Besides the frustration of blocking a sidewalk or travel lane, this nonpermitted contact with the street can be coordinated to cause maximum destruction. There is little stopping these people from going to the local "rent all" and obtaining a backhoe. Once in possession of this excavation device, a simple call to the "one call" center will lead them to the high pressure gas line, power conduit or fiber conduit. With this information it is only a matter of time before an incident will occur.

What can be done to prevent these types of attacks? For the public works personnel, it can be as easy as enforcing existing codes and

ordinances that usually require notification of the road agency prior to closing any part of the roadway. It is reporting unscheduled lane closures to the road agency's customer service desk and filing a complaint.

The highest level of defense is a fully funded proactive right of way management program with full permitting authority, enforcement and a sufficient staff of well-trained inspection personnel. Few cities in the country are at this level and we may all suffer as a result. A disruption in one utility can have a domino effect to other utilities and copycat crimes could perpetuate from one city to another.

Who is out there to help you? The American Public Works Association (APWA), American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) and the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) are all available to assist anyone interested in developing or improving their right of way management program. ❖

This article is not intended to exploit the opportunities for individuals bent on destruction but to highlight the value of our transparent infrastructure. The risk of having someone use this information for ill intent is outweighed by the need to highlight the vulnerability.