



VIEW from the TOP

An Interview with International President Gordon MacNair

Gordon MacNair, SR/WA gained a lot of insight into the Association having been involved with the IRWA at the international, regional and chapter levels. In 1998, MacNair was sworn in for the first time on the International Executive Committee (IEC). “By running for the IEC, I hoped that this would allow me an opportunity to implement some of these ideas and hopefully improve our Association,” says MacNair, who has been an IRWA member for 18 years. “As well, with being a Canadian, I thought that I could bring another perspective to our Association, eh!”

MacNair takes great pride in being one of the few Canadians to serve as the Association’s international president. Now as IRWA’s 50th president, MacNair leads a dedicated team of volunteer leaders in the

IEC who all share a common goal: the vision of the Association.

That vision is to “create public awareness, trust and confidence in the right of way process to build a better world,” which MacNair believes serves as the foundation for moving the Association forward to the next level. “This is the goal of the IEC, and it is something we have been working on for a long time, thanks to our roadmap, the Strategic Plan,” MacNair said during the banquet of his official installation into office at IRWA’s 50th Annual Education Conference in Philadelphia, Pa. in June. “For the next year, the [IEC] will be implementing a number of initiatives that we developed thorough the process and we will continue to look at other ways to move our Association forward.”

BY MARY ANNE MODINA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL COUVRETTE



MacNair is the manager of Strategic Projects and Environmental Remediation for the City of Ottawa, where he and his team oversee all appraisals for city requirements, manage the environmental remediation for city-owned sites and old landfills, and engage in strategic projects that involves major acquisitions such as office buildings, lease negotiations and other unique projects.

Managing both roles in his professional career has certainly been a challenge, and one that hasn't always been easy. But through the support of his family, his employer, and having his priorities in place, MacNair greets his term with open enthusiasm and unreserved motivation. We got to know MacNair recently and got him to share his view on the Association and the Right of Way profession.

row: What attracted you to a career in the Right of Way profession?

GM: Like a lot of people, I stumbled into it. A number of years ago, I was employed as a manager of a financial institution and was looking for a change so I applied for a right of way position with a government agency. Since my background was in real estate appraisal, I thought this would be a unique opportunity to look at something different from what I had done in the past — I've always enjoyed new challenges.

row: What was the first position you held in the Right of Way profession?

GM: I was hired as a property negotiator with a government agency in (British Columbia) some twenty years ago.

row: What has been your most challenging experience as a right of way professional?

GM: The interesting thing about being in the Right of Way profession is that one is faced with many different challenges from time to time. One of my most recent challenging experiences relates to overseeing the management of 'old landfills' for the City of Ottawa. Our main priority is the protection of public health and the environment, but we are also concerned about potential liabilities for the city. With the old landfills, we sometimes have to acquire additional buffer land or conversely dispose of a portion of the land to an abutting land owner when deemed appropriate. We've also had situations where we provided a right of way for access purposes over an old landfill. Where it becomes a real challenge is managing the media inquiries related to this project as you can sometimes be misquoted by the news media. This might come as a surprise to a lot of people.

row: What do you enjoy most about your profession?

GM: We belong to a multidiscipline profession, which is a real benefit in today's economy. It is getting more and more difficult to specialize in one area within the new economy and the Right of Way profession [provides great opportunities] to learn to become adaptable and flexible in this economy. An added bonus is that we get to meet a lot of interesting people in our profession.

row: What prompted you to become an IRWA member in 1986?

GM: I was employed with a major utility at the time and they encouraged their employees to become a member of the IRWA.

row: How do you think your term, as IRWA's 2004-2005 president, will differ from your predecessors? What would you do in your tenure that will affect change in the IRWA?

GM: I don't see it as being different but merely building on what we have established in the past. Our main direction has come from focusing on our strategic plan, which is our roadmap to where we want to take our Association.¹

row: What has been your biggest challenge since serving on the IEC?

GM: There have been numerous challenges, but probably the biggest challenge was when I chaired the Task Force that looked into the relocation of headquarters to a different city and state. The Task Force spent close to two years focusing on this study which required extensive research involving relocation costs, labor costs, etc. In the end it was rewarding since our recommendation was a unanimous one, and the decision was not to relocate from Torrance, Calif. based on the information that was available at that time. As a matter of fact, I was recently able to share our experience with another nonprofit [organization] looking at relocating their headquarters.

row: As an international leader, what advice, ideas or recommendations would you give to Association leaders at the international, regional and chapter levels to encourage them to provide additional value to their Association and continue to become more involved in shaping the future of their profession?

GM: For the different associations, I believe it is important that one has a good understanding of evolving governance structures, services to members, expectations of members, potential competition, and other trends such as technology observed by organizations in the association industry. It is also rewarding to be able to think strategically about your profession and be able to assist in setting policies and direction. As a point



of interest, I would also note to potential volunteers that they not get caught up on the operational issues as that is the responsibility of [International Headquarters] staff.

row: The Association's demographics indicate that the Right of Way profession is getting older. How will the leadership appeal to 'younger' potential leaders and get them more involved?

GM: This situation is not unique to the IRWA as a number of other associations are faced with a similar problem. I believe we have to do a better job of getting younger people interested in our profession whether it involves targeting students at colleges or universities. The bottom line is that we have to be better prepared to identify these future leaders so that we can nurture them by coaching and mentoring. By the way, this could involve our own children, as I know that one of my daughters has expressed an interest in possibly working in the Right of Way profession.

row: What do you think the future of rights of way and the Right of Way profession will be?

GM: First of all, I think that we have to redefine what the Right of Way profession means to us as an Association. It is no longer just about creating new highways and utility corridors. Our profession has become a lot more complex and we will have to become more flexible and adaptable

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with the constant changes that will be taking place. Clearly, I envision the Right of Way profession becoming more technology-based in all aspects of our profession and more complicated due to all of the proposed regulations that will have to be satisfied.

row: As you look ahead to the future of the profession and the Association, what strategic initiatives does IRWA need to take?

GM: For starters, I think we have to do a better job of marketing ourselves and making people understand what the IRWA is all about. But before we do this, it's important we define what the IRWA means to us because it is more than acquiring property for a linear corridor. Through the strategic planning process with the IEC and region chairs, it is our hope this can be accomplished later in the year. Once this has been established, this can be included as part of our new marketing strategy.

row: The IEC has talked about the Association becoming a clearinghouse of information to our members? What steps do you think we need to take to accomplish this?

GM: We already have a good start on this with the IRWA Web site, which gives our members access to past *right of way* Magazine articles for their project-research needs. We also provide a job bank for employers and employees in the Right of Way industry. Moreover, the Web site has the Hot Topics section to keep our members informed of changing regulations and policies that could affect our profession.

row: Why should someone involved in the acquisition, management, or disposition of real property become a member of the IRWA instead of an alternative professional organization?

GM: The IRWA is a unique organization — we are a multidiscipline organization whereas the alternative professional organizations tend to specialize in a specific area. With the crossover in the various disciplines

within the Right of Way industry, the IRWA provides its members with an opportunity to understand the ‘big picture’ when it comes to right of way projects. This is a real plus for someone who works in the Right of Way profession.

row: How can the Association best serve its members?

GM: Introducing various communication tools such as Board Briefs, *right of way* Magazine, Membership Advantage and improvements to our Web site demonstrates IRWA's commitment to keeping members informed, but we have to continually look at ways to improve communication amongst ourselves. We must continue to look at other ways of providing membership services to our members such as the delivery of education. This also means keeping abreast of technology trends to stay ahead of the curve so that we can continue to be the leader in the Right of Way industry.

row: What challenges would you like to see the IRWA face in the short-term and long-term?

GM: With respect to the short-term, the financial health of our Association has been a concern for the past couple of years but we now seem to be on track and it is important that we continue to monitor this situation closely. I would also like to see some proposed changes to how we govern ourselves as outlined in my message in this issue. For long-term

challenges, I think that it is important that we continue to form alliances with other partners, government agencies, monitor technology changes and constantly look at opportunities to advance our Association.

row: You have volunteered a lot of your time to the IRWA over the years, what has been most rewarding for you as a long-term leader of the Association?

GM: The Association has helped me grow as an individual and develop in my professional life. In return, whenever possible, I'm taking opportunities to pass on what I've learned by being accessible to new and existing members who express a desire to learn.

row: How would you describe some of the benefits of giving back to one's profession?

GM: As someone once said, “You get back three times what you put into it,” and I believe this certainly applies to our profession.

row: How have you personally been a ‘living example’ of service to the right of way community and civic engagement?

GM: Like a lot of people in the Right of Way profession, I consider myself to be a dedicated and hard-working individual and someone who ‘walks the talk.’ I also have a lot of mentors in my life and act as a mentor for other people, which reinforces my favorite expression, ‘None of us is as smart as all of us.’

row: How do you stay abreast of the current trends and keep up-to-date on issues in the Right of Way industry?

GM: By reading *right of way* Magazine, researching on the Internet, taking IRWA and other professional association courses, attending the IRWA annual education conferences, and developing right of way

educational courses. Being an instructor for the IRWA also helps me to keep abreast of changing trends in our industry. I'm a big promoter of keeping yourself informed, as it is very important in this knowledge-based economy.

row: If you had to recommend one class to any right of way professional, which would it be? Why?

GM: We offer a number of excellent courses but if I had to pick just one it would probably be Course 100 - Principles of Land Acquisition. This is an excellent course for the new right of way practitioner. It is a four-day course that spends time on each of the seven disciplines within the Right of Way profession. For me, this is a must course for any new employee in our profession.

row: How do you feel IRWA's educational program meets the needs of the various state/provincial certification guidelines and initiatives?

GM: It is important for the state/provincial certification guidelines that courses keep current with the changing trends in the Right of Way profession and I believe that the IRWA does an excellent job of this with its courses and material. This was recently demonstrated with the release of the revised Principles of Right of Way textbook, which will become a living and breathing document. Another benefit is that with taking an IRWA course, the learning process not only involves theory but also practical real-life experiences. As Confucius is quoted saying, 'To hear, I forget; to see, I remember; to do, I understand.' I believe the IRWA courses are very successful in this regard. In addition, the introduction of the Chapter Assistance program on the regional level will provide regions

with the seed-money funding to address continuing education issues as well as assisting struggling chapters in offering IRWA courses.

row: As a right of way professional and a member of the IEC, you have often been required to travel a great deal. How have you managed being away from your spouse and children? What has helped you overcome the challenges of being apart from your family for a long period of time?

GM: Being a member of the IEC requires a significant time away from our families. My first priority has always been my family and as such there have been times when I was not able to attend an IRWA activity or had to leave an IRWA meeting early to attend a family function. Having said this, it is important to note that my fellow members of the IEC were always very supportive in this regard. Mind you, there have been times when my family could hardly wait to get me out of the house.

¹ For more information on IRWA's Strategic Plan, please visit irwaonline.org.



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