



AN INTERVIEW WITH IRWA INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT, **RANDY A. WILLIAMS, SR/WA, MAI, FRICS**

BY BARBARA BILLITZER

A consummate professional with a host of esteemed credentials, there's no mistaking that International President Randy Williams takes his career and educational goals seriously. As he shares some of his past experience, his attention is clearly focused forward on taking the Association to new heights.

You have volunteered much of your time to IRWA. What has been your most rewarding experience?

There is no single answer. I really enjoyed my time as President of Chapter 74. On the mornings of our chapter meetings, I would call members who had not been attending our lunches to personally invite them. At least half these

calls were successful, and we had a number of members re-engage with the chapter as a result. Even though our chapter had less than 100 members, we put a priority on earning the SR/WA designation. The year I was Chapter President, thirteen members earned their SR/WA, and if I had submitted my paperwork on time, there would have been fourteen!

Being the Co-Chair of the 2008 International Conference in Austin was also a tremendous experience. For the five years leading up to it, the Three Amigos (Larry O'Neal, Randall Kopfer, and I) sang and danced and gave away every gift we could find from the Lone Star State. The Austin conference is one that people still talk about.

These past years on the International Executive Committee have also been incredibly rewarding. Our region chairs are fully integrated into our International Governing Council, and I can say with confidence that our decisions are now a consensus of all ten regions, rather than just the IEC members. I feel fortunate to have been an officer during these changes.

What originally attracted you to the right of way profession?

Like many, I discovered right of way indirectly. I had worked as a real estate appraiser since 1977, but my experience was in working with financial clients like banks, savings and loans and real estate investors. When I went to work for an appraiser who specialized in eminent domain, I soon discovered that right of way work was challenging as well as lucrative. Moreover, the financial work had periods of inactivity, so right of way work broadened my client base. An added bonus is that because right of way is such a specialty practice, not all appraisers understand or compete for this type of work.

What is today's greatest challenge for the right of way profession?

There are a number of challenges. First is the scarcity of funds for infrastructure. The days of "if you pave it they will come" are over. In fact, Connecticut just reduced their state employment by over 4,000 workers, with ten percent of the cuts coming from their Department of Transportation. Our Canadian regions are faring better than those in the U.S., but it is a safe assumption that the days of easy money are a thing of the past. In the future, public-private partnerships are going to be much more prevalent.

We also continue to face a graying of the profession. In Texas, our DOT has had substantial attrition due to retirement. There is huge amount of expertise that is being lost. And this is not a unique situation. The appraisal segment in general is facing a substantial loss of members due to retirement, as well as changing needs in the marketplace.

Where do you see the most growth potential?

If we are talking about actual work for our members, then the utility industry has tremendous potential right now. While dollars may be tough to come by for transportation projects, energy projects are going to be funded. The oil and gas

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production in North America needs substantial amounts of pipeline and accompanying facilities. Our electrical grid has immediate needs, and the wind and solar power coming online will need supporting transmission lines.

If we are talking about growth as an organization, we have multiple possibilities. As I said, the utility industry will continue to grow, and we can support this growth by expanding our education and training. In growing our membership, there are huge numbers of municipalities and utility companies, among others, that don't know what we have to offer. Any entity that builds, owns or manages infrastructure has a need for our services. Our opportunity will come from explaining the value of having educated professionals on their projects.



Celebrating his 30th anniversary with wife Penelope at the Conference, Randy observed, "I now have so many friends through IRWA that my professional and personal lives are fully intertwined."

What do you see as the greatest benefit to being an IRWA member?

For me, it's the opportunity to belong to a professional organization with a body of knowledge and experience. At any IRWA chapter meeting, there is a chance to interact with the very people who use our services. Attending a chapter meeting is like swimming in a sea of business contacts.

Being involved in the Association also offers an invaluable chance to interact with policy makers. We have partnerships and/or relationships with the Federal Highway Administration, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Federal Aviation Authority, Federal Transportation Authority, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Bureau of Land Management, as well as with AASHTO and various other non-governmental organizations. We are also a member of the National League of Cities, an organization comprised of over 1900 cities and municipalities. Virtually all of their members deal with infrastructure and could be a source of work for our members.

We are also reaping the benefits of having the SR/WA Designation, as well as our many specialty certifications. In my state, the Texas Department of Transportation recognizes the value of these certifications and designation in their requests for proposals. John Campbell, Director of the Right of Way Division for TxDOT, once told me he knew when someone was planning on leaving his department for the private sector because they started requesting funds for the IRWA courses needed for getting their credentials!



The Presidential puppet never fails to generate a bidding war at the annual auction. Of course, all proceeds benefit the Education Foundations.

What role has education played in your career?

When I first started working on eminent domain assignments, I needed specialized coursework to help me competently perform my assignments. IRWA appraisal courses gave me the expert tools I needed, and the negotiation courses turned out to be incredibly useful as well. In fact, the negotiations courses helped me to better understand how past events could poison the well for future negotiations. This perspective has been invaluable. Since taking those courses, there have been a number of times where a landowner expressed bitterness over a condemnation experience that took place more than ten years earlier, and I was able to use my skills to succeed in spite of that.

In addition to earning my SR/WA, I hold the MAI designation and have received assignments from European clientele where the contract stated that an MAI would sign the report. The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, the largest bank in the world, is getting ready to confer the MAI designation to all its chief appraisers. This international recognition has proven to be invaluable in the United States.

My FRICS designation (Fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors) is highly recognized in Europe, Asia and Africa. Last year, I was asked to perform some valuation assignments in Mexico for European investors. It made a difference to the client that I held the FRICS designation. We are already working for international entities, and recognition of IRWA's certifications and designation is desirable. Both these appraisal designations are recognized globally and as a result, perceived as highly valuable. Soon, IRWA's will be perceived as valuable throughout the world, too.

How does global outreach benefit our existing members?

Many members have asked me how international outreach can help them. My answer is that we already are doing business in a world economy. PBS&J is now Atkins-PBS&J and the company is headquartered in Great Britain. TBE is now Cardno-TBE and is headquartered in Australia. Cintra, headquartered in Spain, and one of the largest private developers of transportation in the world, is currently building a toll road in Central Texas. Past International President Faith Roland, SR/WA is doing work in Bellevue, Washington for Arup, a company headquartered in London, and is helping them analyze alternative alignments for sound transit routes. If you talk to members of our International Pipeline Committee, you will find that many of them are involved in overseas projects.

At the moment, we don't have a direct competitor for our particular sector of the real estate profession. This could change if we are inwardly focused and ignore the world's demand for our services. While one of our major strengths is our education program, developing and maintaining education is extremely expensive. Offering our existing courses outside North America will enable us to generate more course income, and that can be used to develop new courses for all of our members.

Where is the greatest demand for IRWA courses and credentialing?

We have numerous opportunities globally. When we announced our Top Ten Infrastructure Projects of the Past 75 Years in 2009, the media attention was reported worldwide. Shortly thereafter, we started receiving emails from around the world. Many of these went something like, “we didn’t know you existed,” followed by “how can we obtain your education and designation?”

The South African Right of Way Association (SARWA) has been an affiliate of IRWA since 2000. At the moment, they are getting ready to build 7,000 miles of electric distribution line, and four companies that are big IRWA supporters have expressed interest in those South African business opportunities. In June, SARWA and IRWA signed a partnership agreement where we will adapt our education to their laws and culture and train their facilitators. SARWA will be promoting our certifications and designation and any South African that desires our certification or designation will need to join IRWA and pay membership dues. We anticipate having a South African IRWA chapter in the very near future.

China has asked us for course work. We had declined for several years because we felt we were not ready. Now we are ready and will be teaching several courses later this year in Beijing. This is not a junket or a fact finding trip. We will be putting on courses and have already received payment for our services. China is not only developing massive amounts of infrastructure, they are investing around the world. As they invest in infrastructure projects, we want IRWA courses to be their primary source of education.

What changes do you see for IRWA over the next five years?

Five years from now, IRWA will be larger in terms of members, and we will have greater influence with chapters outside North America. We anticipate the completion of a fully revamped ethics procedures and professional standards. Right of way professionals are held to a high standard, and our ethics procedures must keep pace. As a result, our International Ethics Committee Chair William Dee, SR/WA and Co-Chair Theresa Brennan have assembled a team to examine those procedures.

As our designation and certifications have gained a higher perceived market value, a more rigorous enforcement standard is essential. The need for higher level and more technical courses will increase, and IRWA will help meet these needs by developing new courses for the advanced professional. There will always be a need to enhance our educational courses.



What would you say to about right of way as a career to someone just entering the workforce?

The good news is that the need for right of way professionals is expected to escalate in the coming years. What we do is difficult. If it were easy, then anyone could do it. Canada and the United States are still relatively young and growing countries, and their need for new and improved infrastructure will only intensify. This need, coupled with the recent retirement trends, work to ensure that there will continue to be a strong demand for qualified professionals in the foreseeable future.

What do you hope to accomplish as President?

Chapters are the lifeblood of the Association, and I want to acknowledge them for the vital role they play. This year, I plan on personally phoning every single chapter president and listening to what they have to say. A major strength of IRWA is that we are a bottom-up organization. The chapters are our strength, and each chapter gets two votes at our annual board meeting. Our International Governing Council has all ten region chairs along with the IEC members. The IGC reflects our membership in that there is a mix of government employees, independent consultants, and small and large right of way and engineering firms. This is the group that leads the IRWA. Headquarters does not make the leadership decisions; the IRWA members who make up the IEC and IGC make the major decisions, which are implemented by Headquarters.

As a member of IRWA, you can rest assured knowing that I, as well as every other member of the IEC and IGC, will work every day toward helping members in their careers by advancing this profession we love. I am really excited about the challenges and opportunities the coming year will bring.