

An Interview with IRWA President **Jim L. Struble, SR/WA**



As Jim assumes the role of IRWA President, he shares his optimism for the future of the right of way profession.

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

A couple of things come to mind. A personal favorite is having had the opportunity to meet so many members while attending various Association meetings and events. I would say that my most rewarding experience in the Association—the one that I am most proud of— was being able to participate in the Education Summit that was established in 2005. I genuinely believe that the 12 strategies developed during the Summit will be recognized as one of the most significant accomplishments by the IRWA. The Summit helped solidify the strategic direction of the Association and created a strong foundation for serving the educational needs of our members in the future.

What originally attracted you to the right of way profession?

After attending Indiana State University, Evansville in 1986, I relocated to Fort Collins, Colorado to accept a job in the Operations and Maintenance Department at the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District (NCWCD). In 1989, management posted a new position called Right of Way Intern. I applied for the position and got it. I knew very little about what I was getting myself into at the time, but I can now say that it was a smart move on my part. I got married at the end of June and started the new job in July 1989, and I am still loving both of those decisions nearly 20 years later. The right of way profession has provided me with some incredible opportunities and has been an extremely rewarding experience.

What lead you to become an IRWA member?

Back in 1989, I can recall overhearing my boss and a coworker talk about the IRWA. Despite the fact that I asked them about the Association on multiple occasions, they never invited me to attend a local Chapter meeting in Denver. (Perhaps they wanted to make sure I was going to stick around before introducing me to the chapter folks.) Ironically, the first IRWA function I attended was the Annual Conference in 1990, and Denver Mile-High Chapter 6 was the conference host. I was hooked immediately. I attended every IRWA function possible, and it became increasingly obvious that membership in IRWA would prove invaluable. By the fall of 1990, I was already well on my way toward earning the SR/WA designation.

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

For someone who is new to the profession, attending an IRWA course is a great way get immersed in this amazing profession. In addition, the networking opportunities are unbelievable. The unique opportunity to connect with fellow right of way professionals that you would normally never meet is priceless on both a personal and professional level. It provides you with contacts all across the country—people you can call on when you're facing a new project challenge—to give you candid feedback and solutions that may have worked for them in similar situations. Anyone who attends their local chapter meetings, the annual conference or serves on a committee can attest to the unique networking opportunities available through Association meetings and events.

What would you say is the Association's greatest strength?

That's an easy one—the membership. The Association has benefited greatly from those members who volunteer countless hours at the local, regional and international level. Regardless of what is needed or required, our members are always there to step up and help the greater cause. We are also fortunate to have so much employer support. Their contributions in giving their employees time away from work to serve as volunteers, as well as their generous financial support, have been extremely helpful in ensuring the Association's continued success.

How does your employer feel about your IRWA involvement?

The NCWCD is—and always has been—very supportive of my involvement in the IRWA. In fact, management was instrumental in my receiving the SR/WA designation, as the District paid for all my course tuition and any travel expenses associated with attending the courses. In addition, I was rewarded with a five percent bonus upon receiving the SR/WA designation. The NCWCD management has also been supportive of my involvement on the International Executive Committee. They have long recognized the benefits of having employees involved in professional organizations.

What do you think is the Association's most untapped resource?

We are very fortunate to have so many members involved in the governance of IRWA, however we are always encouraging others to get involved. While there are hundreds of members involved at the chapter, regional or international level, we want to give as many members as possible the opportunity to be involved in the Association. Our Region and Chapter leaders have continued to take on a greater role within the Association. However, in order for them to be fully effective, we must all continue to improve our communications. Information must travel freely in both directions to ensure we're all on the same page. That way, we can work more collaboratively and help each other grow and develop. We believe that there many talented members at the chapter level who would benefit from being more actively involved in IRWA.

Do you foresee any major changes in the right of way profession during the next few years?

Looking forward, I envision that right of way professionals will increasingly be regarded as highly trained specialists. For years, we have struggled to be recognized as a vital part of the public infrastructure process, as opposed to people who just obtain property rights of way, or whatever is needed to move a project forward. This recognition starts with us—the members. Collectively, we must continue to demonstrate our high quality standards, promote our strong work ethic and reinforce the role we play in ensuring infrastructure projects are handled professionally.

I also see a continuation in the trend to use consultants to oversee new projects rather than hiring new staff within the agencies and private companies. As a result, we will see these companies and agencies learning how to better manage their consultants rather than actually working in the field to complete projects.

How do you keep updated on issues and trends in the right of way industry?

Recently, I have been reviewing the daily articles posted on the Industry News Today section of the IRWA website, which I have found to be incredibly diverse and informative. In fact, several of these articles have opened my eyes and helped me better understand the differences in right of way issues throughout the United States and Canada.

I also attend the Denver Chapter 6 meetings regularly, and I've been pleased to say that the chapter has been extremely proactive in securing leading professionals to speak on issues and trends that affect members of our local chapter. Given my responsibilities on the IEC, I haven't been able to attend as many IRWA courses as I'd like, but I do look forward to seeing what types of changes have been incorporated into our courses. And of course, reading the IRWA magazine always helps keep me abreast of the changing environment.

You've been involved with the International Communications and Marketing Committee since its inception in 2006. How would you describe their progress to date?

The individuals appointed to this Committee are all seasoned right of way professionals who have a vested interest in advancing the Association's goals and mission. The committee has made enormous progress by identifying several initiatives that will help create additional awareness of IRWA among key stakeholders. This year's committee will focus on the implementation of these initiatives.





Auctioning the incoming President's "likeness" has become an annual tradition and generates contributions for the education foundations.

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

I have been a member of IRWA for 16 years and have always been amazed at the countless number of hours that so many of our members devote toward improving the Association. We have such a unique profession, and those who volunteer seem to get achieve great satisfaction through their involvement.

The opportunity to be a member of a chapter board or committee as well as an International Committee affords our members the rewards of directly affecting the future of their profession. I believe these members would agree that the knowledge and insights they have gained by being a volunteer member is a huge benefit to them professionally and provides the personal satisfaction of giving back to one's profession.

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

In early 1990, the NCWCD was asked to construct a large water line project to serve its constituents. None of us in the department had ever been involved in purchasing easements for large projects. I was given the job of overseeing the purchase of all necessary easements for the project and was given a very short time to get up to speed. We hired a consultant to help with the project and were successful in completing the acquisition. Often times, the acquisition was completed just as the construction crews arrived, but the project was completed without delays. Of course, projects of this size and scope have become increasingly easier as I've gained additional experience. Taking IRWA courses and networking with peers has certainly complimented that experience.

What role has education played in your right of way professional career?

As I mentioned earlier, my employer has been very supportive of my involvement in IRWA. Part of that support came from an agreement

with my employer that I would pursue the SR/WA Designation. The education I received from the courses required has helped me greatly in my career. I was like most people—I entered this profession not knowing a whole lot about what I was getting myself into. Taking courses from IRWA helped me prepare for the task that I was taking on with my new position at the NCWCD.

What has been the biggest challenge during your five years on the IEC?

The learning curve was extremely steep. I had just completed my role as Region 9 Chair and had served as Vice Chair of the International Professional Development Committee. Naturally, I thought that I was pretty knowledgeable about the IRWA. I quickly learned that I had barely scratched the surface.

Initially, it was difficult to leave the IPDC and my comfort zone of working at the regional level. I was forced to come to the reality that I needed to think internationally—and not just regionally. When I first joined the Executive Committee, I found myself frustrated with our educational program. There seemed to be so many issues that needed to be addressed, and on the surface it appeared that we were not making much progress. However, once I became involved on the IEC, I quickly saw how much work was taking place behind the scenes. And after witnessing the commitment demonstrated by each of the other IEC members, I realized just how much each of us could impact the big picture.

What would you say to encourage others to become more involved in shaping the future of their profession?

I would tell them to get involved in their local chapter; we need to continue to bring new people into decision-making roles of the Association. Also, members can join one of the nine education committees, as I believe these committees are becoming increasingly valuable at shaping how the profession is changing. We have some extremely dedicated and well-connected individuals on these committees, and I feel confident that they are capable of leading us into the future.

How can we motivate young potential leaders to get them more involved in IRWA chapters and committees?

Just ask them! Believe it or not, there are many people who want to get involved, but they have no idea how to get started. It is up to us to ask them. Then, once someone volunteers, we must be cautious not to discourage them. In the past, I've heard a newly recruited volunteer suggest we try something new, only to be told that we tried that in the past and it didn't work. Well, timing is everything, and an idea that may have failed before may actually work now. It's our role to encourage them and be receptive to trying new things... even if they aren't so new.

A few years ago, the Executive Committee announced that they were looking at a venue to bring young new people into the IRWA to help develop new leaders. They called it the Young Leadership Council (YLC). As I look back at those individuals who participated, several of us have continued to volunteer taking on leadership roles within the Association at the local chapter, regional and international levels. Maybe we were on to something back then, and have now realized the magnitude of our willingness to stay involved.

As President, what are some of your most immediate priorities?

The first major priority is finding a successor for Dennis Stork, our Executive Vice President, who announced his retirement effective late 2007. Dennis has done an exceptional job at IRWA headquarters and in helping the IEC with many changes that have been implemented since joining the Association. Another priority is the appointment of a task force to evaluate the SR/WA Designation and Certification Programs. To ensure that we are meeting the evolving needs of our members, IRWA must offer the right programs, not just addressing their current needs, but anticipating their future needs in order for them to improve themselves in their chosen profession. Additionally, with the Association's 75th anniversary approaching, we plan to assemble a special task force to develop promotional plans and generate publicity as we acknowledge this important milestone.

What do you hope to accomplish during your 12 months as IRWA President?

This is something that every new President is asked. When I was first elected to the Executive Committee, Don Marx was the current IRWA President. He advised me that, if I had an agenda, I needed to share it with the other committee members early on. That way, the committee could work on it together in hopes of completing my goals before my tenure as President was over. I agree with his philosophy, because if we wait until the year we become President, then the entire process becomes muddled down. We want to ensure a seamless transition from one President to the next and simply cannot afford to change direction every year.

Among the 12 strategies that were developed during the Education Summit, we have made a lot of progress to date, yet we must all realize that some of them take longer to complete. For example, we are continually seeking ways to enhance our educational offerings, and based on feedback from our members, we plan to add more advanced courses. We are also focused on the communications and marketing of the IRWA, as there is a huge market of potential members that are missing out on what we have to offer.



The proud Struble clan: Crista, Sonya, Jim, Zoe and Riley.

The right of way profession is basically unknown to career professionals and others entering the workforce. What would you say to someone who is unaware of the diverse opportunities available?

As we all know, very few of us entered our respective fields with the idea that we wanted to be involved in the right of way profession.

I would tell someone that this is a profession that has exceptional career opportunities with room to grow and expand. There are literally hundreds of new projects in development all over the United States and Canada. Additionally, as our infrastructure ages, both countries are seeking ways to improve or expand these facilities. With so many different aspects to right of way, our profession offers unparalleled opportunities for anyone entering the field. We can prove this to anyone who is willing to take the time to visit the IRWA website. By reviewing our course offerings, membership benefits, professional development programs and networking opportunities, we can help them excel in their chosen field and become the best at what they do.

As I remind the design engineers of my company—you can plan a project, fund it, design it and hire contractors, but if you haven't procured the land for the project, you can't build anything! 🎯