

A Seat at the Table

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As right of way professionals, we work in a profession that is largely unknown and frequently not factored into the initial planning phase of a project.

My vision is that we will one day finally get what we deserve - a seat at the table. What does this seat mean for us as right of way professionals? A seat at the table means we are considered an integral part of the project team from the very beginning, and not just an afterthought, brought in at the eleventh hour.

We all have stories about being called in to help with a project at the last minute. We find each team member solely focused on their particular specialty, while equally important aspects of the project get ignored. Design and aesthetics are a top priority, and details like property rights get overlooked, sometimes not even making it on the project manager's radar until it is too late. Infrastructure projects frequently have funding tied to timelines, which puts increased pressure on obtaining rights as soon as possible. By the time we are pulled into the process, we are forced to work quickly against an impossible deadline, and this often leaves the property owner feeling pressured and without many options.

Over the past several months, I have had the opportunity to speak at various IRWA functions and meetings about the importance of professionalism. It is something I take very seriously, and something I have based my career on. A true professional works to ensure property owners are treated justly and fairly, while still recognizing the importance of project timelines. Oftentimes, when your schedule is tight, balancing these two goals is nearly impossible. Something will get sacrificed, and it probably won't be the timeline.

As members of IRWA, we have all committed ourselves to adhering to a certain level of professionalism while maintaining the high ethical standards for which we are known. We treat property owners with patience and respect, and when we are rushed and forced to gloss over information or details, we compromise our reputation. Without adequate time to establish a relationship of trust and professionalism, equitable negotiations with the landowner are challenging at best.



We need that seat at the table to bring balance and objectivity to projects. The seat will need to be earned, through diligence and perseverance, demonstrating our significance by delivering tangible benefits at every turn. Once we are recognized for our professionalism, project managers will want to involve their right of way partners at the beginning of the project. By involving us early, the project manager can not only save time and money, but they can build positive relations with landowners and other stakeholders. In addition to our high ethical standards and expertise, we bring perspective, problem solving and a multi-disciplined approach to every infrastructure project. What smart project manager wouldn't want to reap all of these benefits?

We represent both a body of knowledge and experience that cannot be duplicated outside our profession. By being a positive force in the industry, and on every project we work on, we will reinforce the importance of our role on the project team. We have the ability to make a difference by bridging the gap between landowners, project developers and the respective agencies involved. How we represent the profession today will determine our place at the table tomorrow.

So we should all ask ourselves, do we want to be perceived simply as members of an organization, or as right of way professionals, dedicated to elevating the stature of the profession? We are only as strong as our weakest link, and we must all commit ourselves to continuing our education, maintaining our exemplary ethics, building our credentials and motivating each other toward excellence. The ability to build a bright future for our profession is in our hands – right now.