

# THE ROLE OF THE ROW AGENT

A successful effort in Vermont

BY ALLYSON BROWN

**T**he role of the right of way agent is important in any project. Typically, this role is most intensive at the beginning of the project, ensuring that any given rights, easements or land is acquired to support the continuation of the project. However, as right of way professionals, we know that our roles carry on far beyond the planning and acquisition stages. And while securing the necessary rights and/or land is incredibly important, so equally is the work that we do through the remainder of the project to foster productive and positive relationships with the landowners and the public now and into the future.

## Rural Areas vs. Industrial Areas

Like many other electric transmission utilities, Vermont Electric Power Company (VELCO) has assets on both developed and undeveloped properties. Vermont, being the largely rural state that it is, has more right of way in corn fields, forests and open land than it does in back yards. While either scenario has its own pros and cons, performing large scale maintenance efforts in highly congested areas proves to be one of the most challenging and one where the agent can really depend on being a vital part of the project from the early stages to the very end.



VELCO's infrastructure was largely built in the 50s and 60s, and there has been a significant effort over the past few years to get aged poles replaced. The replacement of these (mostly) H-frame structures requires heavy equipment and the work occurs over a couple of months. We in Vermont have become accustomed to significant access road construction in order to get heavy equipment to our assets—all in extremely challenging terrain in any given time of year. Working along busy road side traffic or on a sidewalk in front of an operating business is not something that we experience every day.

Often when this maintenance occurs in typical rural parts of the state, the right of way agent's role in this project is a heavy lift in the beginning—researching landowners, making contact and presenting the proposed scope of work, site meetings, identifying potential concerns, acquiring additional rights if needed and developing trustworthy relationships. During the actual construction work, the agent usually serves as support to the field crews and is called upon should any problems arise. I recently learned the importance and value of the right of way agent in highly congested commercial, industrial and residential areas.

## A Daunting Task

VELCO recently replaced 17 aged structures in Williston, Vermont, which is one of the most highly congested areas on our system in terms of commercial, residential and industrial areas. Working in areas like Williston pose challenges for multiple departments and the success of the work relies on communication, planning and creativity. This project serves as our latest example of a culmination of hard work from across the company coming to fruition, and it highlights the importance of the right of way agent in this kind of work.

These structures were within the parking lots of shopping centers, on the berms of storm water detention ponds, within the active construction of condo complexes, adjacent to daycares and directly on front lawns in residential developments. Before any field work began, there were extensive reviews, landowner and stakeholder meetings, and collaboration among the entire project team and our contractors. The line outage was rescheduled three times over the past few years, making the collaboration for this work even more challenging due to varying time of year conditions, resource planning, complicating landowner communications and dealing with an area of our state that is constantly changing and being built up around our infrastructure.

Getting this important work done while also ensuring safety and limiting the impacts to our neighbors' properties required the entire project team and our contractors to collaborate closely with a heightened sense of communication and appreciation for small details. Access crews were tasked with finding or creating enough space for line equipment to be set up despite limited space. In residential areas, extra care had to be taken on our neighbors lawns and driveways as the cutting of vegetation, excavating of holes and

presence of heavy equipment was of particular concern. In multiple areas, we had to coordinate with businesses and residents in housing complexes to ensure they had egress/ingress. There was a significant amount of effort put into coordinating with the large scale construction where multiple buildings, parking lots and utilities would be installed on either side of and within the VELCO right of way. Compared to project efforts in more rural areas where crews work in the woods and on the farmers "back forty," there was an overall heightened awareness for this work being performed directly in the public eye and among very busy areas where safety for our crews and our neighbors was paramount. The relationships made with landowners in the early stages of this work were of great value to us and honoring promised commitments required the right of way agents' attention throughout the entire project.

## The Importance of Communication

Communicating schedules and scope of work with every landowner/stakeholder along this line was essential to this maintenance being performed smoothly. The many landowner/stakeholder meetings that occurred leading up to this effort paved the way for a great working relationship with our neighbors. We sought out their concerns, questions and priorities first so that we could develop our plans for access and line work with those in mind as much as possible. This really built a foundation of trust even in our early interactions. Our willingness to meet multiple times, answer questions, send maps and provide progress updates also added to our reputation for being a trusted partner. Communicating with the crews and landowners during the restoration phase was critical in ensuring that all commitments were met before leaving the property.

It is also our typical practice to follow up with the landowners after the completion of the work in the form of a survey. Landowners have the chance to give feedback or mention any last concerns using this tool. The right of way agent's role continues to be valuable even after the work is complete.

## In Summary

We created even stronger working relationships with our landowners in the Williston area through doing this work. Additionally, I believe the interdepartmental connections within the project team and our company grew stronger through the communication and coordination that this effort required, especially with everyone working toward the same goal: to perform this work safely and in positive coordination with our neighbors. The right of way agent may be known for the important role they play in the beginning of any project, but they are often the first person a landowner connects with and they remain the common thread throughout the project. Most importantly, the right of way agent is the last person to leave a positive lasting impression. 🌟



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