

A ROAD

Well Traveled

BY JOACHIM (JOE) PESTINGER, SR/WA

Working in right of way has led me down some interesting paths, both personally and professionally. It all started when Marta Goosey, SR/WA asked, “Would you please finish coordinating Course 101 for me? I’m leaving for a Senior Management Development Program in Washington, DC.” That’s when I became actively involved in IRWA. That’s also when she became my lifelong mentor.

As someone who quite accidentally became a right of way negotiator, I was lucky that I had education-minded bosses at the Clark County, WA Public Works Department who encouraged me to coordinate and attend lots of courses. While employed there, I became an approved IRWA Facilitator. When I moved on to the Engineering Department for the City of Seattle, my new employer encouraged me to stay active in the Association. It was through continuing education that I learned some creative ways to tackle unique problems.

Creative Problem Solving

The City of Seattle operated a smelly landfill, and we were stunned when methane gas was detected in nearby utility vaults. Further testing confirmed that gas was showing up in a daycare center and neighboring homes. When it reached explosive levels, the fire department evacuated eleven families. The community was up in arms, real estate agents steered buyers away from “Methane Meadows,” bankers red-lined the area and local attorneys anticipated more work. Something had to be done quickly, but what?

A team of staff and city attorneys came up with “Seattle’s Good Neighbor Program,” where 1,000 homeowners were offered the chance to have their property appraised as if there was no gas problem. If their home didn’t sell within six months, the city would buy it. Or, if an offer was lower than the appraised value, but still a reasonable offer, the city would accept it and make up the

difference. All in all, we purchased, managed, and resold 165 homes and subsidized 104 private sales. The program was completed a year ahead of schedule and \$1 million under anticipated costs, so we were pretty happy with its success.

In 1990, I was hired by Denny Ingham as the Director of Real Estate Services at the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT). Soon after, portions of the I-90 floating bridge across Lake Washington sank during reconstruction and a major storm. To reduce competition, a contractor tied up all known pontoon construction sites. Based on what I had learned in an IRWA Property Management class, I suggested we get options on some sites that could be converted for pontoon construction. We obtained assignable options on two West Coast sites. Construction bids came in \$20 million below the estimate, so the option money was well spent.

While at WSDOT, I also represented 14 western states on the Executive Board of AASHTO’s (American Association of Highway and Transportation Officials) Right of Way and Utilities Subcommittee. To learn how other countries tackle transportation and construction problems, AASHTO, the Federal Highway Administration and the Transportation Research Board sponsored international scan tours for engineers. I thought a scan tour for right of way best practices was needed, so I teamed up with Dick Moeller to draft a joint proposal. Once approved, a group of us, including Wayne Kennedy, SR/WA and Catherine Colan Muth, met with transportation departments in Norway, Germany, the Netherlands and England to learn about best practices in Europe. We brought back six ideas for use in the United States. One was called the Early



Move Incentive Program, a concept that was used by Stuart Waymack on the tenant relocations for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge project. This saved the Virginia Department of Transportation about \$4.8 million.

Since retiring in 2000, I started a small mediation company to help governments and property owners resolve their differences. I have also served as a consultant to public and private companies and governmental agencies, and stay involved in community service.

Looking back, I am eternally grateful to Marta for that nudge she gave me to get involved with this great Association. During my 35 years as an IRWA member, I’ve enjoyed serving on the International Education, Property Management and Transportation Committees, as well as in numerous chapter positions. However, the most gratifying experiences have come through facilitating courses in more than 70 cities throughout the U.S. and Canada. It has been so invigorating to meet so many exceptional people, all of whom are eager to learn, willing to share and continually striving to improve their service to the public.