



Pursuing the Right Actions

When infrastructure decisions impact the health and welfare of our citizens

BY BRAD YARBROUGH

A few years ago, country singer Marshall Dane sang these lyrics: “I’m not a bad guy, I just make some bad choices.” This conveys a truism. Good people make bad choices. Some are costlier than others. And, when a choice endangers the health and welfare of others, the ethics of the issue becomes more critical.

The medical field has long recognized its obligation to making good choices. Ethical choices. It routinely faces the

struggle to allocate limited resources to essential needs. The entire concept of triage exemplifies the dilemma, as it rations treatments based on the severity of one’s condition when resources are insufficient for all to be treated immediately.

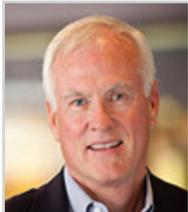
The health care sector has captured these often conflicting concerns with the term, bioethics. Sometimes controversial, it addresses policy and practice, human rights and financial interests, needed research and limited resources.

The relevance of bioethics to our industry deserves attention. There’s been a

very public, decades-old concern about America’s deteriorating infrastructure. Let’s go back to 1984 when Marshall Kaplan authored “Hard Choices: A Report on the Increasing Gap Between America’s Infrastructure Needs and Our Ability to Pay for Them.” In the report, Kaplan stated, “...our failure to develop a long-term coherent infrastructure policy has resulted in the rapid depreciation of the country’s roads and its water and sewer systems. We have not been wise investors. Continued absence of a coherent federal infrastructure policy will result in a significant reduction in the quality of American life and the productivity of American society.”

Clearly, infrastructure issues affect the health and welfare of all Americans. A few examples will provide proof. Hurricane Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast in 2005 and resulted in over 50 failures of the levees and floodwalls protecting New Orleans. Designed and built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the responsibility for the maintenance belonged to local levee boards. The cost of the failure was over 1,000 deaths and roughly \$80 billion in property damage to the historic city, 80 percent of which was ultimately submerged underwater. In 2007, the I-35W Mississippi River bridge collapsed in Minneapolis killing 13 people and injuring 145. Arguably, its catastrophic failure could have been prevented if engineering flaws were noticed through proper maintenance. The incidence of less costly failures is far too numerous to mention.

These days, Flint, Michigan is in the news. There’s been a disastrous infrastructure failure resulting in its water supply being unfit for drinking. The State Attorney General said, “The situation in Flint is a human tragedy in which families are struggling with even the most basic parts of daily life.” Known as an economically poor city, its water supply is delivered through aged pipelines, some known to have lead content. The decision in 2014 to take



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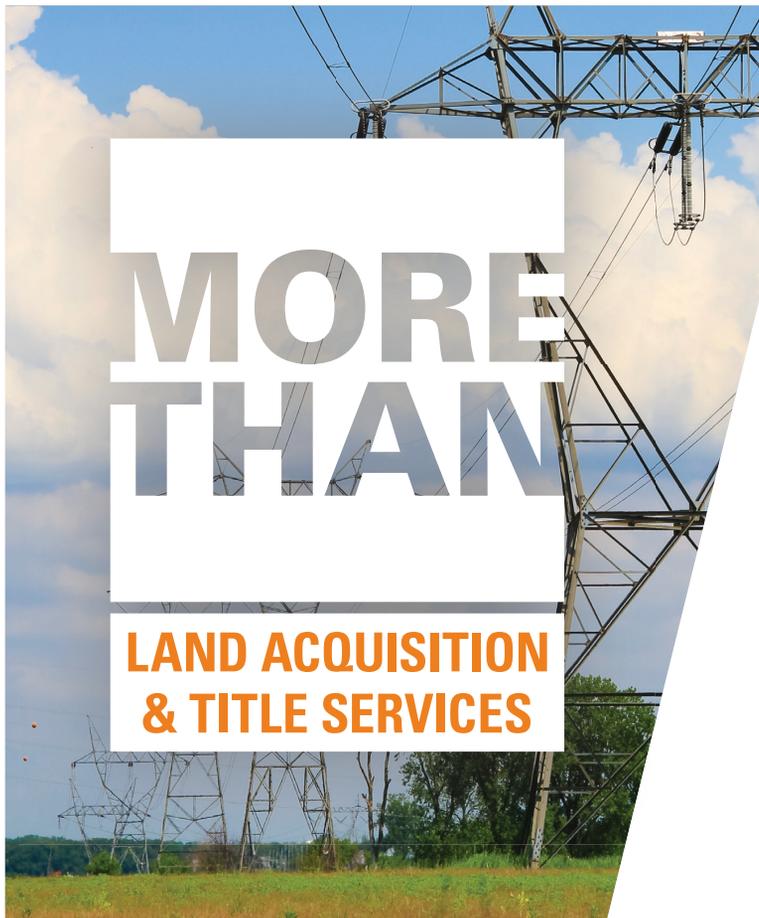
water—as a cost-saving measure—from the polluted Flint River has led to the crisis that has implicated local, state and federal authorities. Bad people? Not necessarily. They simply faced some hard choices and made the wrong decision.

A Need for Infraethics

Never before has there been the absolute, undisputable need for a focus on infrastructure. As right of way professionals, we should be near the epicenter of the discussion. I believe our industry should introduce a new term, “infraethics.” Just as the medical profession has benefited from creating the topic of “bioethics” to sharpen its

focus on ethics, perhaps our introducing a new term would have a similar effect over time. In giving attention to our nation’s infrastructure, both the private and public sectors must make difficult choices, good choices and, yes, ethical choices. We must pursue the right actions and accomplish them in the right way. This must be our mutual commitment even in the midst of vast needs and limited resources.

I’ve always appreciated our industry’s role serving the infrastructure needs of our nation. We must do so with a focused attention on the related ethical issues. After all, right of way professionals should always be advocates of doing things the “right way.” 🌱



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