

EFFECTS OF GLOBAL PANDEMIC ON THE RIGHT OF WAY PROFESSION

Navigating through the unknown



BY DARRYL ROOT

The Corona Virus (COVID-19) changed the world. It also changed the right of way profession.

The right of way profession is a people-centric business. Everything we do touches the lives of people in some way. From land acquisition to relocation, we impact people's lives. Our industry involves a day-to-day interface with people. This interfacing includes not only those property owners and displacees impacted by our projects, but also our co-workers. And these co-workers are not only fellow right of way agents, but also a myriad of professionals from inter-related disciplines: appraisers, engineers and environmental colleagues.

With the advent of COVID-19, right of way professionals have had to adapt to a change in that interface. These changes took a variety of forms.

Adapting to the Circumstances

Social distancing has become the norm. In both land transactions and relocation tasks, the traditional close interaction with owners and displacees has had to be modified. More offers to purchase right of way have been mailed out instead of conducting face-to-face meetings. If face-



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to-face negotiations are held, there are less handshakes and there is certainly more hand washing before and after the meeting.

In some cases, the closing of court buildings and recorders' offices have delayed condemnation proceedings, as well as the recording of deeds and other acquisition documents. Some title companies have closed or reduced working hours. Dealing with right of way purchases from government property owners has been made even more complicated as approval from City Councils and other governing bodies are delayed due to postponed or canceled meetings.

More displacee interviews have been conducted over the phone and more relocation information has been gathered through emails. Fewer field visits are made in an effort to contain the spread of the virus. Interaction between potential landlords and displaced tenants are limited and fewer relocation documents have been hand delivered. Many more scanned

documents are sent for signatures. Rendering advisory services for residential displacees have become more difficult as social distancing and "shelter in place" orders limit access to inspect comparable replacement housing.

For appraisers, gaining access to a property for appraisal inspections has become more difficult. Some owners are more hesitant to grant access due to concerns over COVID-19. This is especially true for interior improvement inspections. Consequently, information from public sources such as County and local property records have become even more important than usual. More appraisal questions from property owners are answered over the phone and by email.

In some cases, State and local orders limit the size of public meetings that could occur. The size of internal agency and consultant meetings has also been limited. Even among colleagues, phone conferences and WebEX meetings have become the norm. Any in-person meetings are conducted for short duration periods following the CDC recommended social distancing guidelines. The opportunities for hallway conversations or to just stop by a co-worker's desk to informally discuss a right of way issue are limited, especially in states that are hardest hit by the virus. Avoiding crowded elevators, lunch rooms and restaurants are a necessity. Hand sanitizers have become standard office equipment.

Working from home is no longer an occasional occurrence, but commonplace. Many right of way professionals have learned to juggle all of their work activities from home offices. This juggling act is performed while simultaneously taking care of children, many of whom are at home due to school closures. Despite its potential for distractions, it was necessary for the home environment to become more business-like and productive.

But even with a global pandemic, there are still schedules to meet and projects to keep on track. Many states view engineering and right of way functions as essential services due to their connection to infrastructure development. Therefore, while our right of way functions become more complicated, deadlines still remain. To meet these deadlines, a thorough review of project schedules is necessary to see where time could be saved while still observing and complying with all Local, State and Federal regulations.

In Summary

While the virus has changed the way we carry out our right of way tasks, in many ways it has strengthened the core values of our profession. Our response as an industry has demonstrated extraordinary flexibility and problem-solving abilities. We have learned more about distance learning through Bluejeans and other virtual/video platforms. IRWA Chapters have been experimenting with virtual meetings. We have sharpened our long-distance negotiating skills and learned to leverage our interconnectivity. These lessons learned will help us to improve our capabilities well after this crisis is over. The expanded use of technology (virtual meetings, digital signings, etc.) will expedite these processes on projects as we move forward. ✪



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