

THE LAST WORD...

A Time to Reevaluate: What Is Our Biggest, Best Safety Opportunity Today?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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There's always a lot of good discussion around the industry about how important safety is, about what we can do to improve it – things like more accurate marking of utilities, better locating of marked lines, advanced locating equipment, proper training of crews, job planning, consistent notification of One-Call systems and so on.

This is all fine, but it's what we're not talking much about that will have the biggest safety impact of all. Our biggest opportunity is with unmarked sewer lines! All sewer lines should be marked just like all other utilities. The task of getting them marked may seem impossible, but it's just not so. We can get it done!

But why should we? As the industry uses more trenchless technology, unmarked sewer lines present a mounting risk of accidental and unknown cross-bores. When a construction crew installs a utility line and doesn't know where the sewer lines are – or if any sewer lines are even there – it can lead to huge problems.

The Common Ground Alliance, among others, has already established best practices for crews using trenchless technology. However, these best practices assume the existing underground lines are marked – and that's the problem. The vast majority of sewer laterals are not required by law (or existing laws enforced) to be marked. This makes boring around unmarked sewer lines like boring through a "minefield."

Contractors and utilities install the utility lines with trenchless technology by punching or drilling a hole underground, and then pulling the gas, telecom or electric line back through the hole. If the utility line is pulled back through a sewer line, the excavator will end up leaving a utility line inside the sewer line without even knowing it.

Danger

This is where it gets dangerous. Cross-bored lines can go undetected for months, or even years; but that just adds a false sense of security. Because eventually, a home or property owner will have a sewer backup. The homeowner calls a plumber to clear the blockage. Once called, the plumber uses a mechanical rotary device to root out the blockage. Unfortunately, this process almost always slices the utility line that is inside the sewer line. If he cuts an electric line, the plumber runs the risk of electrocution and the public faces a major power outage. If it's a phone line, it could mean phone outages, including the loss of 911 emergency services. If it's a water line, there could be flooding and road damages. And if it's a gas line, people's lives are at risk! Gas can leak into buildings, ignite, and have catastrophic consequences. Although unlikely to occur, the results are absolutely devastating when it does. This is precisely why all sewer lines must be marked.

Despite all this, the majority of sewer laterals in the country are still not required to be marked - leaving utility companies, contractors and especially the public bearing the risk of cross bores inside unmarked lines. This is a risk that no one alone can prevent, but one that, together, our great industry can effectively eliminate. And we will!

Already, numerous states are starting to change their laws to place the critical task of marking sewer lines on the entity that's in the best position to identify the location of the sewer lines, the system operator. It's just unreasonable to expect anyone else to do it. Private homeowners don't have the expertise or the means. (Both legal and practical precedents have confirmed that it's not the homeowner's responsibility to mark utility lines.) The other utilities and their contractors can't be expected to locate sewer lines when they have no records of their existence or location. For sewer lines, just like all other utilities, the system operator is the right choice to mark the lines they operate.

Fortunately, these statutes usually require that new sewer installations be locatable. It is inexpensive and effective. As an example, the gas industry has been required to install easily locatable metal tracer wire with all new plastic gas lines for years.

Cost concerns

So, how should we deal with the additional costs? First, the economic costs to mark the sewer lines are insignificant compared to the costs that will occur if accidents aren't prevented. When you add in the safety factor, there just aren't any compelling arguments against requiring all sewer lines to be marked by law. Still, even though the up front costs are minimal compared to the long term cost savings, there are initial costs of prevention that need to be addressed. Privately owned sewer systems (like trailer home parks) can pass the minimal additional costs along to their residents. Municipalities can pass their costs along as part of permit, excavation, connection and monthly usage fees.

The truth is that, in the interests of SAFETY, SAFETY and SAFETY, the marking responsibility needs to be placed on the entity in the best position to maintain records and mark the underground facilities: the operator. These sewer system operators should be treated the same as the operators of gas, electric and telecom systems. They should be required to be part of their state's One-Call system, marking their sewer lines, as other utility operators are required to mark their respective utilities.

Our industry can get the biggest and best return for its safety investments by getting laws passed that would require all operators of sewer lines to mark them. ■