

Reducing Late Locates is a Collaborative Process: THE KEY TO DELIVERING EFFICIENT, TIMELY LOCATES LIES IN A JOINT COMMITMENT AMONG INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS

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An investment in record accuracy would enable utility owners to support more informed project design, and efficient field locates.

Within the first 10 months of last year, 20,600 unique excavators placed over one million ticket requests with Ontario One Call, resulting in 6,090,000 locate notifications to utility owners. These volumes coupled with slight variations in regional demand and communication challenges can have a significant impact on the efficient delivery of locates, exposing vulnerabilities in the system while decreasing confidence in project timing.

Further challenged by factors that include deficits in the quality of project designs, outdated records, lack of communication and insufficient quality and auditing procedures, late locates have become increasingly prevalent – from January to August, Ontario One

Call received more than 800 formal late locate complaints – double what was received in the entire previous year. To act on this challenge, a Late Locate Symposium was held at the end of 2019, which provided an opportunity for industry stakeholders to come together and brainstorm strategies for addressing late locates. This article includes a discussion of the main strategies conceived at this inaugural meeting.

CREATE AND DISSEMINATE ACCURATE PROJECT DESIGNS

A lack of access to accurate project designs can create a sense of mistrust in the industry that negatively impacts stakeholders. A key take away from the Late Locate Symposium was taking note

of the volume of locate requests that are created for information gathering purposes, rather than imminent excavation. The One Call system was created to prevent damage to utility infrastructure. When project design risk is pushed to the excavator through RFP and contract language, some of which flows from Ontario Provincial Standards, excavators are often left with little choice but to turn to the locate service to collect and qualify utility design information. Excavators may also request locates earlier than required to confirm a design or ask for expanded locate areas to accommodate design changes in real time. These practices create additional locate demands within regions and can impact the timing of other imminent excavations.

Fostering an industry focus on accurate project designs is critical to removing unnecessary information gathering locate requests from the One Call system. If Subsurface Utility Engineering (SUE) were to be carried out for all major projects, particularly at the municipal and utility owner level, this would reduce project risk for excavators, allowing for sharper locate areas and a reduction in requests, while providing excavators with the information required to secure locates with accurate timelines.

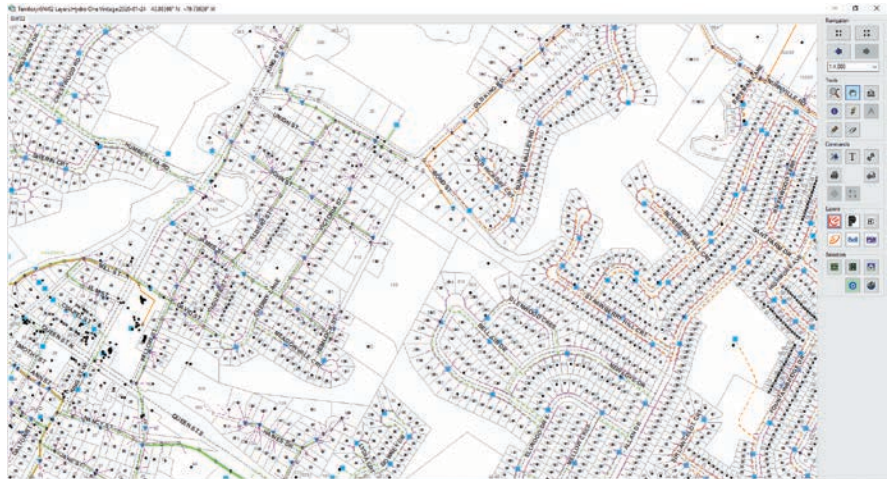
Subsurface Utility Engineering is an engineering practice, governed by the CI/ASCE 38-02 standard, which provides a framework for establishing utility data integrity based on four Quality Levels (QL-D, QL-C, QL-B and QL-A). It provides a reliable method for accurately establishing the vertical and horizontal position of buried utilities. Utility conflicts can be identified at the outset, so that project designs can be modified as required. Deliverables typically include an engineer-stamped CAD or GIS map, and the drawings incorporate utilities verified in the field as well as through records research.

ENSURE UTILITY RECORDS ARE UP-TO-DATE AND SPATIALLY ACCURATE

A significant investment in record accuracy would enable utility owners to support more informed project design, and efficient field locates. When records are accurate, field locating activities are considerably streamlined. Access to up-to-date records also supports more reliable office clearing activities, and a defined understanding of excavation risk. Excavation proximity tolerance zones can be sharpened, reducing the volume of field locates required so that resources can be redeployed.

MANAGE SYSTEM DEMAND AND COMMUNICATION

Strategic information sharing can have a significant, positive impact on



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preventing late locates. Utilities and Locate Service Providers should work closely with other stakeholder groups to foster an understanding of monthly, regional and seasonal locate volumes. A forecasting model should be created that is informed by data collected on capital works projects, and is regularly assessed to ensure successful execution. Though collecting regional volume data is far from a simple exercise, stakeholders can help to alleviate roadblocks by leading dialogue, particularly at the beginning of peak season.

Furthermore, if there is an anticipated spike in regional locate request volumes, the possibility of a delay should be communicated by Ontario One Call both before and during new ticket requests. Access to this information can enable key project timelines to be adjusted before costs escalate for an excavator. Considering that almost half of Ontario One Call users submit a single request annually, these communications would significantly reduce escalations caused by unmet expectations.

EXTEND THE UTILITY LOCATE EXPIRATION WINDOW

Workflows could be significantly streamlined by extending the utility locate expiration window from 30 to 60 days for all

utilities across the province. Currently, an excavator might receive locate clearances and completions at the outset of a request, and then receive other locates many days beyond the five day completion requirement. The initial locates received become invalid, and the excavation window narrows. Any project that could have been completed within 30 days may require a second set of locates to keep the site active for completion. Expanding the locate expiry to 60 days could reduce construction delays and stakeholder costs.

IMPLEMENT GUIDELINES THAT WILL IMPROVE THE TICKET REQUEST PROCESS

A lack of trust in project designs, shifting project risks and uncertainty in locate timeliness have resulted in workarounds, excess and inaccuracies within the Ontario One Call system. With average weekly locate requests exceeding 120,000 in Ontario, the ability to filter and group tickets, and allocate Locate Service Provider resources is greatly impaired since tens of thousands of phone calls and emails are necessary to qualify and quantify excavator needs.

As a result of the Late Locate Symposium, a number of suggested

guidelines are emerging that could greatly improve the ticket request process and ensure that Locate Service Providers receive all information required to effectively execute. These include guidelines for ensuring that locate requests are clearly defined and accurate, that project limits do not exceed the excavation area, that an actual excavation date, depth and method are provided, that all pertinent details and document attachments are submitted with the request and so on. The guidelines also assess factors such as whether the locate request is for pre-engineering work, design work, or reasons other than imminent excavation, whether all provided information aligns, and whether there is more than one excavation listed on a single locate request.

Furthermore, accurately defining large project requests versus single address, and setting request size limits would allow work to be dispersed and scheduled more effectively.

FOCUS ON COMPLIANCE AUDITING & EDUCATION

More than 79% of ticket requests are now processed through the Ontario One Call web portal and projects that contain more than one civic number, or have no civic number associated with the project must be processed through the online tool rather than over the phone. Though the intention of this shift is to streamline the ticket request process, it also creates challenges as it impedes the ability to thoroughly audit requests and monitor the quality of data submitted. As a result, Utilities and Locate Service Providers who receive thousands of tickets on a weekly basis are unable to process tickets without first contacting the excavator to ask for clarification on the information provided or to obtain supplemental data. More comprehensive auditing procedures need to be implemented at the Ontario One Call level to manage the way in which information is collected and validated. To decrease delays, Utilities and Locate Service Providers must ensure they have the administrative staff in place to assist with the validation process.

ATTRACT AND RETAIN QUALIFIED STAFF MEMBERS

The Ontario labour market is tighter than ever, with many economists claiming the province is already at full employment. This puts the onus on Utilities and Locate Service Providers to find unique methods to attract and retain talent. Working closely with employment partners and local colleges can help provide access to a pool of candidates, and from there, effective hiring and retention strategies should be implemented. When it comes to retention, Utilities and Locate Service Providers (LSPs) must consider many factors such as work environment, educational reimbursement, opportunities for advancement, a focus on health & safety, and whether a comprehensive training program is available to ensure the skills and abilities are in place to complete safe and accurate locates. Due to the varying nature of project size and complexity, LSPs must have the ability to locate a wide variety of buried infrastructure, navigate congested project sites and ensure compliance with regulations and health & safety requirements. As the industry is seasonal in nature, Utilities and LSPs can also improve retention by training staff members to carry out a wide variety of activities, helping to avoid layoffs during slower times of the year.

PUT CHECKS AND BALANCES IN PLACE

A thorough review of the factors impacting the delivery of locates across Ontario reveals challenges in communication, compliance, risk management, contract language, resources and ownership. It's clear that all stakeholder groups play a part in impacting the effective delivery of locates, and that change will require an industry-wide partnership.

However, the onus for project delays currently weighs heavily on excavators. Financial penalties, although partially available through Ontario One Call, largely ignore the role that each stakeholder group plays in contributing to waste, excess and inefficiencies within the One Call system.



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To encourage the delivery of timely, efficient locates, penalties should be considered for factors including inaccurate designs, a lack of investment in record accuracy, ticket request abuse, insufficient compliance and auditing procedures, inadequate staffing and a disregard for timelines.

A FINAL THOUGHT

By investing in the creation and dissemination of accurate and complete data, implementing improved communication protocols, advancing education, enforcing compliance for all stakeholders and executing comprehensive quality auditing procedures, industry stakeholders can work together to regain trust in the locate process, minimize project delays and reduce risk to infrastructure across the province.

