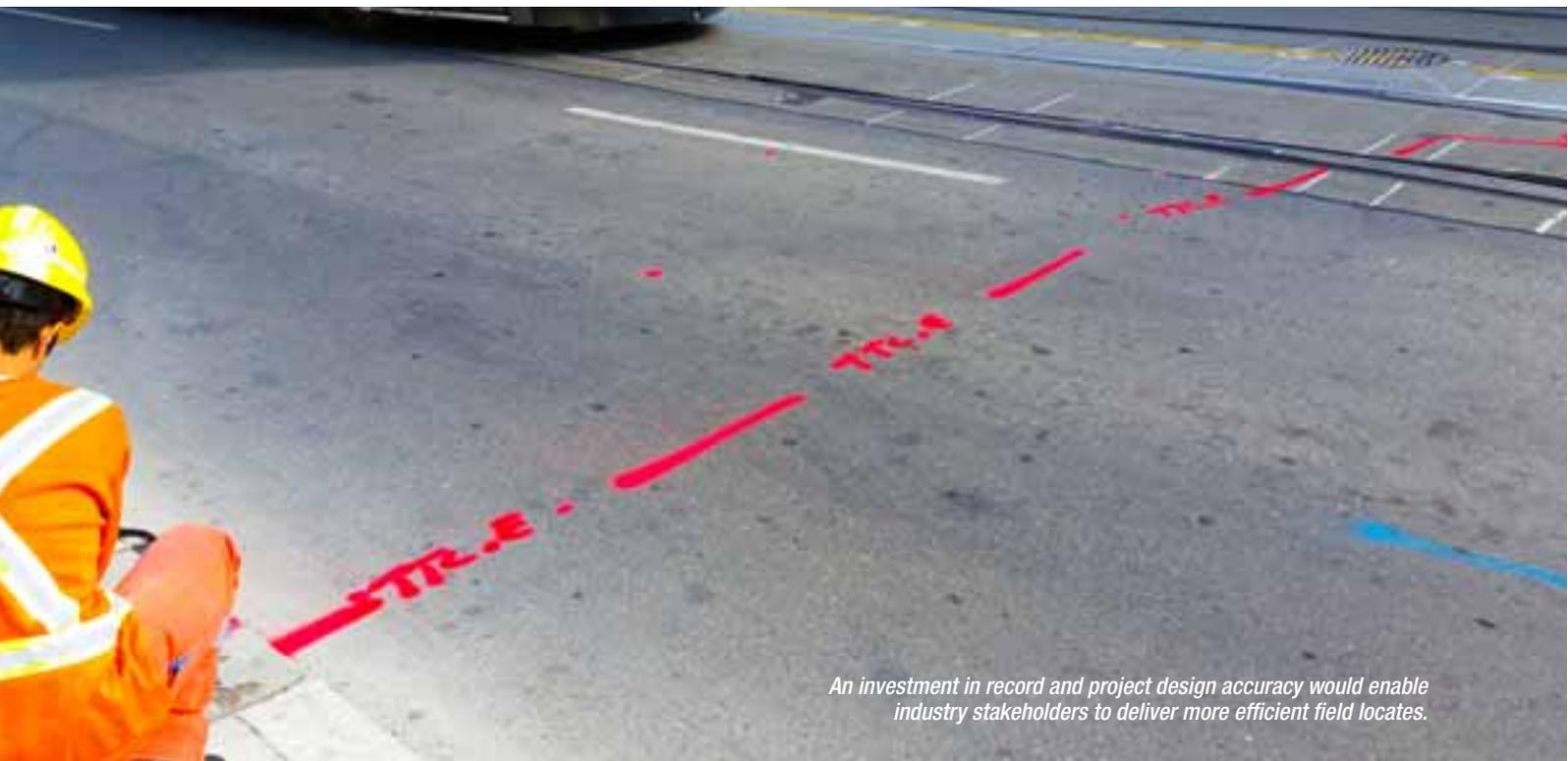


Stakeholder collaboration is the ticket to delivering accurate, on-time locates



An investment in record and project design accuracy would enable industry stakeholders to deliver more efficient field locates.

By: Kevin Vine, President, multiVIEW Locates Inc.

The latest DIRT Report issued by the Common Ground Alliance (CGA) found that damages to buried infrastructure were almost equally caused by locating root causes (28 percent), excavation root causes (29 percent), and no-locate root causes (29 percent).

The causes of late locates are varied and complex. Challenges related to managing system demand is a key factor. Within the first 10 months of last year, 20,600 excavators placed over one million ticket requests with Ontario One Call, resulting in 6,090,000 locate notifications to utility owners. Further exasperated by deficits in records and project designs, lack of communication and difficulties with regards to training and retention within the industry, 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.

The prevalence of COVID-19 has not helped this situation.

Uncertainty around essential work in the spring, coupled with excavator staffing challenges, has made for unpredictable demand. This article provides some key recommendations for solving these challenges, and reducing the prevalence of late locates.

Achieve an accurate picture of the project area

A lack of access to accurate project designs can create a sense of mistrust in the industry that negatively impacts stakeholders. At the Ontario Regional Common Ground Alliance Late Locate Symposium that was held in 2019, stakeholders remarked on the volume of locate requests that are created for information gathering purposes, rather than imminent excavation. When project design risk is pushed to the excavator through contract language, some of which flows from Ontario Provincial Standards, excavators are often left with little choice but to turn to the One Call service to collect and qualify utility design information. Excavators may also request locates earlier than required to confirm a design or ask for expanded



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.

locate areas to accommodate design changes. These practices create additional locate demands and can impact the timing of other planned excavations.

Another significant roadblock to accurate locates is the absence of white-lining on a project area, a practice that is not currently legally mandated. Earlier this year, the CGA published a whitepaper that explored roadblocks to delivering accurate, on-time locates. The whitepaper found the large majority of locate service providers and utilities believe that accurate white-lining solves ticket issues by narrowing ticket scopes or sizes. Project areas not being clearly marked or defined was ranked as the top barrier to locating utility lines accurately and on time. Based on research included in the whitepaper, the CGA determined that white-lining, updated facility maps and comprehensive project designs may be the industry's most effective paths to timelier and more accurate locates.

Manage system demand and communication

In a recent article published by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO), the organization's executive director states: "Contractors across the province are trying to catch up with the backlog caused by COVID-19 and this heightened activity has resulted in an increased demand for utility locates in many municipalities." Furthermore, the recently published CGA whitepaper that includes survey results from 400 locators found that a struggle to manage request volume is one of the leading causes of late locates.

Strategic information sharing can have a positive impact on workload management. Utilities, excavators and locate service providers should work closely with stakeholder groups to foster an understanding of monthly, regional and seasonal

locate demands. Another strategy, recommended by the RCCAO is exploring opportunities for contractors working on common project sites to share locates, rather than requiring contractors on a common site to request their own locates. This would create efficiencies while reducing system demand.

In the 2020 CGA whitepaper, more than 400 locator survey participants revealed that a lack of communication among industry stakeholders is a key cause of late locates. Ninety-seven percent of the surveyed technicians identified increased communication between themselves and excavators as an effective way to improve the accuracy and timeliness of locates. These communication challenges are significantly impacted by the fact that often, insufficient information is captured when locate tickets are submitted at One Call offices across the country.

Implement guidelines that will improve the ticket request process

A lack of trust in project designs, shifting project risks and uncertainty around locate timeliness have resulted in workarounds, excess and inaccuracies within the One Call systems. With average weekly locate requests exceeding 120,000 in Ontario alone, the volume of calls required to clarify locate requests is exponential.

Stemming from the dialogue around late locates, a number of suggested guidelines have emerged 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.



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

Extend the utility locate expiration window

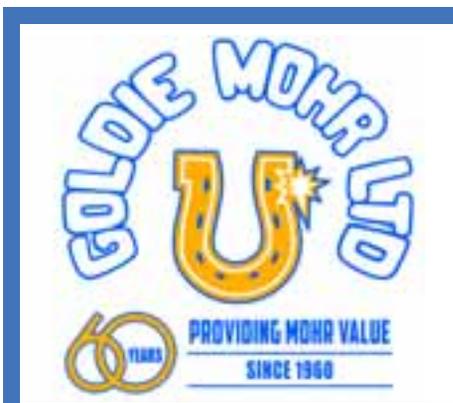
Workflows could be significantly streamlined by extending the utility locate expiration window from 30 to 60 days for all utilities across the province. This sentiment was recently shared by the RCCAO as one of the six steps required to reform the province's locate system. Currently, an excavator might 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 costs.

Attract and retain qualified staff members

The 2020 CGA whitepaper on delivering accurate, on-time locates found that locating stakeholders are deeply committed to safety—an attitude that emerged from the over 400 locators surveyed as part of the whitepaper. However, measuring ticket volume against adequate staffing also emerged from the whitepaper as a significant challenge facing the industry. There are several roadblocks that prevent locate service providers from retaining highly qualified, safety-committed staff. These challenges include a labour shortage, relatively low wages, and turnover that is, in large part, due to seasonal fluctuations in demand. Furthermore, ticket volume alone is not a sufficient metric to predict staffing needs when, for example, a single ticket will cover a residential front lawn while another single ticket will cover two kilometres of urban roadway.

A final thought

By investing in the creation and dissemination of accurate data, implementing improved communication protocols, advancing education, and bettering the ticket request process, industry stakeholders can work together to regain trust in the locate process, minimize project delays and reduce risk to infrastructure across the province.



T: 613.838.5042 www.goldiemohrltd.ca