WHAT'S UNDERGROUND?

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Over the years I have watched as those unsightly overhead utility lines slowly migrated underground. I thought that was great. They were no longer an eyesore and they were more protected underground than flapping in the air. While the lines may be better protected underground, they are far from safe.

The quantities of underground facilities are impressive; actually amazing. Storm sewers, gas lines, steam lines, water lines, cables carrying various things, power, and communications all share the same subterranean space. The sanitary sewer connections between homes, businesses and industries to wastewater treatment facilities are, thankfully, almost exclusively underground.

The sight of multiple lines running from pole to pole while still common is becoming less so. The protection of these underground facilities is important. It is also difficult. The Indiana law that addresses protection of underground facilities (Indiana Code §8-1-26) has attempted to safeguard these facilities, but the law is ineffective without public knowledge of the law and what is underground. The statute also addresses damages if an underground facility is damaged.

I attend the meetings of the Indiana Damage Prevention Council ("IDPC"), the Central Chapter. These meeting are held at a facility on appropriately named Holey Moley Way in Greenwood. There are other chapters in Indiana as well.

The IDPC was created to bring together underground facility owners, operators, government agencies, excavators, industry associations and service providers. This diverse group of people attempts to address issues related to the goal of improving safety and reducing damages to underground and overhead utilities. They address problems experienced by those in proximity to, or working nearby those facilities. Most of the discussion, which can be very lively, centers on providing cooperation and coordination of construction activities, and to improve communication, involvement and more than a superficial commitment to these goals. The Chapter also provides real world experience and information to the legislators regarding excavation, underground facilities and the increasingly complex problems caused when the two are in close proximity; and the two are in close proximity regularly. Basically, every time a spade is put into the ground.

The meetings are interesting as contractors, utility and governmental organizations discuss how to prevent damage to our buried assets. Disagreement is common; debate is engrossing. Everyone in the room has the same goal: protection of underground facilities and making sure that at the end of the day, everyone goes home safely. However, their perspectives are fundamentally different.

Striking an underground utility results in a great deal of trouble. Trouble not only for the contractor that strikes the utility, but also for the utility and the citizens that rely on the uninterrupted service the utility tries to provide.

Few people outside of the industry understand that they may be required by the law to call for utility locates for some very common activities. If you are excavating [1] with a hand tool on your own property to a depth greater than 12 inches you fall within the requirements of the underground protection statute. Planting a tree, putting in a fence or a foundation for a deck, installing a mailbox all require a hole deeper than 12 inches and calling 811 for a utility locate is required.

The front line of the protection protocol is locating the underground lines. You have all seen those little different colored flags sticking in the ground. But did you know that a person that knowingly moves, removes, damages, or otherwise alters a facility locate marking is subject to a civil penalty up to $10,000? Have you seen your children playing with those flags?

William (Bernie) Bernhard of the Association of Equipment Manufacturers was a recent guest speaker at a Chapter meeting. Bernie talked on the subject of the top 10 myths about underground facilities. His approach was from the perspective of boring, but applies to working underground in general. With his permission, and borrowing David Letterman's format, these are those top 10 myths:

1. Depths of utilities can be assumed. Wrong. Locator depths are approximate. Utilities must be exposed to verify location and depth.

2. It will never happen to me. Wrong. Utility strikes happen every day, frequently by people working in their yard. The risk is too great to depend on chance.

3. Exposing to the depth of the utility is good enough. Wrong. Exposing just to the depth of the existing utility isn't enough. Always expose to the depth of the intended excavation path.

4. Just go deep to avoid existing utilities. Wrong. This practice can lead to inconsistent depths for certain utility installations, making future detection even harder. If a utility goes undetected, underground strikes can occur.

5. Sewer lines don't need to be, or cannot be, located. Wrong. Several methods exist for locating sewer lines. Technology is making it easier to locate lines and verify they weren't breached.

6. No locate marks = no utilities. Wrong. If there are no marks, this could mean it was not yet located. Inspect the area for evidence of underground activity.

7. If something happens after I call 811 for a locate, they are liable. Wrong. 811 does not locate utilities. It's the responsibility of the excavator to verify locates have been completed and are correct.

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[1] The statute includes a long list of what is considered to be excavation including "the removal of dirt". In other words, digging a hole.

8. Exposing utilities (potholing) is included as part of the contract price for the drilling. Wrong. This should not be assumed. It's recommended to separate this activity from drilling in the quote. Make sure your contractor complies.

9. We have to accept whatever the caller gives us. Wrong. When you or your contractor call the call center or utility, both parties should provide sufficient details so an accurate and complete locate can be made.

10. Electric strike alert systems can predict an electric strike. Wrong. Sometimes the system may activate in proximity of an energized line, but it cannot be relied on to detect the line before a strike happens.

I come away from the IDPC meetings with a respect for the difficulty of protecting underground facilities, and more importantly, protecting those that work with them. But we all need to know that underground there can be a utility that we may strike when digging in our yards.

We can cause a great deal of damage, we can be fined and the utility can charge us for repairing the damage we caused. Worst of all, we or others can be killed.