

RCCAO proposes sweeping One Call changes



The Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO) is calling for sweeping changes to Ontario's One Call system.

The alliance says utility locates are persistently late—some provided weeks past deadline—due to flaws not only with its rules, but also its governance.

In a typical construction season, late locates are troubling enough. The situation is worse this year as the industry struggles to cope with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including current and new projects, and backlogs caused by the spring shutdown. A lack of timely locate responses, says the alliance, could delay the delivery of municipal and other infrastructure projects that are intended to stimulate the province's economy.

“Contractors across the province are trying to catch-up with the backlog caused by COVID-19 and this heightened activity has resulted in an increase in demand for utility locates in many municipalities,” says RCCAO executive director Andy Manahan. “But this has been a chronic issue as contractors have complained for years that there are long delays for utilities such as gas companies and telecommunications firms to provide markings of where their underground services are located. In fact, a recent article in *Ear to the Ground* estimated that 85 percent of all locate requests are late.”

Part of the problem, says RCCAO, is that Ontario One Call is generally unwilling to prosecute utilities for failing to meet deadlines. Nine of the twelve members of Ontario One Call's board of directors represent utility companies, and may therefore be unwilling to prosecute their fellow utilities.

RCCAO wants to see the One Call board, and its Compliance Committee in particular, to move away from a self-governance model. It proposes that more than half of the organization's board represent non-utility stakeholders such as excavators, municipalities and the provincial government.

That proposal is one of six RCCAO outlined in a brief to Ontario Premier Doug Ford, Minister of Government and Consumer Services Lisa Thompson, and the 19 MPPs who sit on the province's Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs.

The brief also takes aim at the way in which locates are delivered. It proposes that local service providers be prequalified to provide locates through Ontario One Call. At present, specific utility locates, such as for gas lines, are limited to a single company that typically serves a wide geographic area. That method, says RCCAO creates artificial market scarcity, and is open to delays when the locate company loses personnel or is overwhelmed with requests.

“A restructured One Call board should establish a uniform rate schedule for providing locates, where the variance in rates is based on level of risk and difficulty and perhaps geographic region,” says the RCCAO brief. “This structure could then be coupled with the Locate Alliance Consortium model for the delivery of locates, which would help to meet demand.”

The brief also calls for One Call members to extend the validity period of locates to at least 60 days. Longer locate ticket validity periods will reduce the number of locate requests and likely the number and severity of late locates.

RCCAO also wants to see opportunities for contractors working on common construction projects to share locates. As the system currently operates, contractors on a common site must request their own locates. RCCAO would like to see contractors and subcontractors share locates as much as possible to create efficiencies and reduce locate response burdens on utilities.

Two final changes proposed in the brief call for changes to the reporting and record keeping of locate responses. RCCAO would like to see clear differentiation between single-address locates, which are typically those requested by individual home owners, and linear- or multi-address project locates such as the replacement of water mains.

“By modifying the record-keeping process, One Call could then more easily identify problem areas related to the late delivery of locates and focus enforcement efforts,” says the brief.

Finally, the document calls for the elimination of relocates on long-term vertical excavation projects below a certain depth. At the moment, contractors that work on foundation excavation projects, for example, are required to receive utility locates every 30 or 60 days to continue their work.

RCCAO proposes that once the site work goes below the depth of the lowest buried utility, such relocates are unnecessary.

“Ontario needs significant improvement in response times for the delivery of utility markings, especially if we are depending on construction to be a leading sector in our recovery efforts,” says Manahan. “Implementing our six-point plan will reduce locate wait times for contractors and have a substantial and positive impact on helping them deliver timely and cost-effective construction services.”

