

## RCCAO unveils plan to cut waits for utility locates

Angela Gismondi September 23, 2020



A new brief by the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO)** and its stakeholders says the province needs to speed up utility locate response times if the construction sector is going to lead Ontario's recovery efforts post-pandemic.

“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,” said Andy Manahan, executive director of the RCCAO, in a statement. “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.”

The brief, called *Late Utility Locates: Ontario Construction Industry's Priority Solutions*, outlines six measures to improve the response process and the Ontario One Call system.

The system, which is mandatory in Ontario, allows construction contractors and other excavators to make one locate request to a call centre instead of separate calls to each utility in order to minimize the risk of severing underground infrastructure.

Implementing the six-point plan, RCCAO said, would “reduce locate wait times for contractors and have a substantial and positive impact on helping them deliver timely and cost-effective construction services.”

The RCCAO was supportive of the One Call legislation when it came into effect in 2012, said Manahan.

## **Deadlines and delays**

Although most jurisdictions have a deadline of three days to respond to locate requests, Ontario has a legislated deadline of five business days. Over the years, the delivery of locates has been persistently late, with responses up to several weeks after the deadline has passed, said Manahan.

“You can’t make a blanket statement that all across the province we are seeing problems but certainly in urban market areas where there has been growth there has been a systemic problem with respect to timely utility locates,” said Manahan.

“The main reason is the lack of resources that are dedicated to this issue. I know that construction can be seasonal and there are highs and lows but you definitely need to increase the resources to be able to meet that five-day turnaround. We’re not saying anything negative about the companies that do provide locate services, it’s just there is not enough of them.”

## **Ontario One Call board should be restructured**

One of the recommendations is for the province to restructure the board of directors of Ontario One Call so that half of the 12 members are non-utility representatives such as excavators, municipalities and the provincial government. Currently, nine of the board members represent utility members.

“We really do believe that the self-governance model is not working and it needs to be focused on a public interest model,” said Patrick McManus, executive director of the Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association.

“Right now the majority of board structure is dominated by utility companies and the problem that creates is you’re asking a board of directors made up of utility companies to police themselves over the delivery of locates and there is no incentive for them to do it.”

For larger projects, where there are multiple companies responding to a request, some of the locates expire by the time all the locates are received, which requires a relocate request process. One of the recommendations, said Manahan, is for all utilities to be encouraged to maximize the validity period of their locate tickets in order to reduce the number of locate requests.

“It just creates more chaos on the site,” Manahan said of the relocate process. “We thought a simple measure would be the markings should be valid for a 60-day period that would solve a lot of the problems right off the top.”

## **Reporting and recording should be modified: McManus**

Another recommendation, McManus said, is that One Call and utilities modify the reporting and record-keeping process to more easily identify problem areas related to the late delivery of locates and focus enforcement efforts.

“Right now it’s aggregated data on the number of locates received and how many were delivered but what it doesn’t account for is the difference between single address locates... versus construction project locates,” McManus explained. “If they separate out that data you are going to get a much clearer picture of what the big infrastructure projects are facing in terms of locate delivery.

“We don’t think that these six points are going to completely resolve the problem but we think it’s going to substantially speed up the locate delivery process that we are facing right now,” he added.

## **Other recommendations**

Douglas Lapp, president and CEO of the Ontario Regional Common Ground Alliance, said while the recommendation that service providers be prequalified to locate all utilities in order to prevent companies from contracting their locates to a single company makes sense, it’s not that easy.

“In an ideal world you would make one call to One Call, one locator would come with six different colours of paint and paint all the utilities,” said Lapp.

“That makes so much sense but it’s tough for a couple of reasons. For example, in the municipal sector, municipalities generally do not outsource their locates they do them in house. In small municipalities especially they wouldn’t hire a locate contractor because their volume is so low.”

Other improvements suggested in the brief include:

Stakeholders and Ontario One Call working together to maximize the sharing of locate responses among contractors and subcontractors working on the same construction site. Currently, multiple contractors bidding or working on a common construction project must each request their own locates.

Eliminate the need for further locates once a stationary vertical excavation has been dug below the depth of the lowest buried utility.

The brief was sent to Premier Doug Ford and the minister of government and consumer services and 19 MPPs who are on the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs.