

ROAD RIGHTS-OF-WAY

By Paul A. Bizier, PE, DEE



All across Florida, the Department of Transportation (DOT) and local entities are working every year to maintain and upgrade existing roadways. While we all benefit from the better driving conditions, have you ever thought about the underground utilities that have to be relocated in order to make these projects a reality? Road rights-of-way are a primary corridor for underground utilities. Often, an existing right-of-way in urban areas may have a half-dozen or more existing utility lines that include those for potable water, reuse water, sanitary sewers (gravity and pressure), electricity, telephone, and gas. As roads are widened and associated stormwater management systems are constructed, all of the organizations that own and manage these utilities have to scramble for a spot in the available right-of-way.

Typically, as a roadway agency begins design of a widening project, they will contact all the known utility owners in the area and request locations of existing utilities. In some cases, the utility owner will have up-to-date, and accurate, record drawings. This is the best case scenario, but certainly not the most common. Where record drawings are incomplete or non-existent, the utility owners have to field locate their utilities. This can be done in several different ways, depending upon the type of utility.

The roadway agency will then incorporate this existing utility information into their design plans. As the plans reach partial completion, the design drawings and existing utility information are sent again to all the utilities. At this point, the utility owner has to review the design information and determine what is to be done with their utility. This leads to the creation of “Red/Green/Brown” drawings. The utility owner color codes their lines shown on the design drawings to show which existing lines are to be removed (red), which are existing and shall remain (green), and which are to be relocated/reconstructed (brown). In reviewing these locations, the utility owner has to consider not just their own utilities, but where new storm drains may be constructed. Where lines have to be removed or relocated, engineering design and permitting are typically required.

These color coded drawings are then returned to the roadway agency, which incorporates the information into the design plans. Often, there are several cycles to this review and compilation process, as there may be conflicts between two utilities, both seeking to occupy the same space in the final construction. Also during this process, the utility owner has to decide whether to relocate/reconstruct their utilities using a contractor, or to allow the roadway contractor to perform the work under a “Joint Project Agreement” or JPA.

After the roadway design is complete, and all utility work has been coordinated and incorporated into the drawings, construction begins. If a utility is going to re-locate their facilities, this utility construction will usually occur well before any roadway construction. This is the reason that you often see electric companies relocating power poles two to three months before any roadway construction occurs. If the work is being done under a JPA, the roadway contractor takes the responsibility for utility relocation work, either directly, or through a subcontractor. In either event, utility relocation work will often continue throughout the construction project.

Chastain-Skillman has worked with a wide range of our municipal clients on utility relocation projects, ranging from local roads to interstate highways, and in locations that span from rural areas to downtown urban settings, such as the recent relocation of Main Street in downtown Lakeland, Florida.

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