



# Right of Way

## TO THE RESCUE!

BY BETH SMITH, SR/WA

One of my favorite aspects of my job is never quite knowing how a day might unfold. In 2018, Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) acquired a 12-acre property in the floodplain in Oak Creek that had previously been a greenhouse/nursery business. Due to flooding, the property had been abandoned and fallen into disrepair. The structures on the property included a duplex, a metal building and greenhouses in various states of collapse. MMSD planned to demolish the buildings and remediate significant soil contamination on the site.

On Monday, November 5, 2018, I had a site visit scheduled with Mark Mittag, P.E., the project manager and Dick Schluge, the construction resident engineer, who would be responsible for developing the demolition bid documents. It was a chilly, overcast morning. The afternoon/evening forecast called for low 40s and rain, with freezing temps and snow in the forecast for later in the week.

I arrived first to unlock the buildings. The front door of the duplex wouldn't open, so I walked around to try the side door. There, huddled in the leaves that had blown up against the house was a small, wide-eyed black kitten. I think I was as surprised as the little guy was.



Beth cradling one of the kittens in a construction hat.  
(Photo Credit: Mark Mittag, P.E., CFM)



Unexpected squatters discovered at the site.  
(Photo Credit: Beth Smith, SR/WA)



*Mark's cat, Blackberry, all grown up.*  
(Photo Credit: Mark Mittag, P.E., CFM)

“What are you doing here?” I asked, bewildered. He hissed and flattened himself to the ground but was too small to escape. I scooped him up and put him inside my coat, where he settled right down. He was in fairly good shape and cute as anything.

Mark and Dick had arrived at that point and although we didn't know each other well, they seemed amused and unsurprised to learn I had a kitten in my coat. I found a bin so that I could put him in my car, safe from the elements. I decided to come up with a plan for him after we finished our site visit.

We carried on to the last structure — an arched ridge and furrow greenhouse frame a couple hundred feet away from the duplex. The heavy gauge plastic that once covered the frame was gone or mostly in tatters. A section of arches were still covered, but just barely, and the furrows had filled up with leaves and water.

As we were walking through this greenhouse, I heard a faint *mew!* from the other side of the greenhouse. This was not surprising — where there's one kitten, often there are more. On the far side of this greenhouse were some brush piles. I walked slowly next to the piles, calling quietly and making mewing noises of my own. I heard some rustling under one of the piles, and after a while of calling and coaxing, I was able to get a black kitten to come out. She was pretty tiny and noticeably smaller than the first kitten.

As I was taking her to my car, I then heard another very pathetic *mew!* This one was clearly not coming from the brush pile. This mewing seemed to be all around us, when we would move in any direction, it never got much quieter but never got much louder either. Turns out, the kitten was on top of the greenhouse in an area where the plastic was still intact. There was a tree that had grown up at the end of the greenhouse, which the kitten must have climbed up get to the roof.

At this point, we should have been back to the office, but we were in an unspoken agreement that leaving the kitten wasn't an option. Despite being chilled to the bone, we steeled ourselves against the increasing wind gusts to focus on the rescue operation of this last helpless kitten. Even Dick, whose reaction to the first kitten was a you've-got-to-be-kidding-me look, was fully on board. But how to get him down? Though we could definitely hear him, we couldn't see him, and we didn't have any ladders. Even if we did, the roof material was deteriorating plastic. After some trial and error, Dick and I were able to push the plastic up in a literal cat-herding effort to coax the kitten to the end of the roof, where he ultimately leapt down to a waiting Mark, who only got a couple scratches for his efforts. This kitten was about the same size as the second kitten.



We put the third kitten in my car with the other two — upon a closer look, all three were black with faint tabby stripes. I took one more walk around the property to utilize my newfound kitten-detecting hearing powers to check for any strays left behind. I debated making a nest for them and leaving them on the site, in case their mother was around and would come back for them, however, because they were so tame, I suspected they might have been dumped there.

I had fostered kittens before and knew I'd be able to take care of them and find them good families. When I got home with them, I put down canned kitten food, and they dove right in, growling at each other and standing in and on top of their food as kittens do. By the end of the week, they were all spoken for by coworkers. I took care of them for about a month, and by early December, they were in their new homes. And yes, Mark adopted the one that he caught when it jumped off the roof! 🐾



*Beth Smith, SR/WA, is a real estate specialist with the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District and a co-owner of TerraVenture Advisors, LLC. She has 23 years of experience in the right of way industry — her primary areas of expertise are property management, relocation assistance and project management. She also co-hosts the Eminent Domain and Right of Way Club on the Clubhouse App.*

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