

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A RIGHT OF WAY MANAGER?

And what it takes to be a successful one

It's an interesting question. Depending on who you ask, it could derive a multitude of answers. Like, if you ask my daughter, it means sitting around, drinking coffee and eating donuts all day.

**BY PATRICK MCCALLISTER, SR/WA**

I would like to think that when someone tells you they are a right of way manager, you would immediately think, "They obviously know how to get things done." A right of way manager should be someone who knows how to work with a lot of different personalities and get them to come together on one project team to achieve the end goal. They should be capable of communicating through listening and giving directions. But it's also important to give directions in a manner that the person on the other end can fully comprehend what you are trying to communicate.



## We Solve Problems

A right of way manager is a problem solver. They are someone who deals with issues on a regular basis. Knowing how to deal with those issues is critical in being able to deliver a successful project. I know for myself, I try to get answers turned around to my appraisers and acquisition agents as quickly as I can, so they incur very little down time. You may not have all the answers and that is ok, but you do have to know where to find them. There are some questions the right of way manager can answer immediately just from their knowledge of the project. Other times, it's about talking to the designer in order to get more details on a project that maybe the appraiser, acquisition agent or property owner is inquiring about. Sometimes, you'll have to go to the appraiser for an answer that the acquisition agent needs to know. Lastly, it may require going to your client or acquiring agency if you need direction on a financial or legal aspect. That's why it is important to establish the communication lines before you even start to figure out who the players are and who will be rendering decisions about your project from the acquiring agency's perspective.

## We Assemble Teams

A right of way manager is someone who has the ability to assemble the right team for a specific project. One of the first steps I take in the life of a project is to put together my team. I entrust a lot of faith in my most reliable acquisition specialists. I will generally determine who I want my review appraiser(s) to be, then get together with them to look at the project. What types of properties are we dealing with? What types of impacts are we going to cause to these properties? What types of appraisals are we going to encounter? What does our schedule look like for needing to get these appraisals completed? Then we start putting together our appraisal team based on all of the questions we just asked. Not all appraisers can appraise every property type. So, we look at the strengths of appraisers, their availability and how many we will need to get in order to have everything done in the timeframe allotted; hopefully after that's all said and done, we are able to acquire the appraisers that we want based on their availability to be on our team.

When looking to compile my team of acquisition agents and relocation agents (if needed), I look at a few different things. What kinds of properties are we acquiring from — large corporate owned businesses, residential properties, agricultural? What is the social makeup of the project area? Is this acquisition or relocation agent going to be able to effectively deal and communicate with this group of property owners? Of course, then the question becomes: can I get the agents I want to join our team based on their availability?

However, perhaps most importantly, can the team you have compiled work together? As I mentioned above, a right of way manager is someone who can deal with a lot of different personalities. However, that doesn't always mean that every personality can get along with each other within a team. That

is a huge component of putting a team together. And if you have ever worked with a team or on a team where personalities clashed, it makes for a long and painful project. So, the right of way manager has to do their homework and make sure the team they are putting together can work with each other. For me, that is based on my years of experience of dealing with lots of appraisers and agents. However, if this is someone I have never worked with before, I guarantee I have someone I trust who knows them and can give me some information about their abilities and personality.

## We Work With People

Is it starting to sound like a right of way manager is a psychologist? Yes, you kind of are.

Then the project starts, which for me is one of the biggest joys of my job. If a right of way manager is doing the job right, they are busy talking to designers, appraisers, agents and the client while answering questions and ensuring everyone has what they need to complete their task. And hopefully issues are coming up that I have to deal with.

You may be thinking: *wait, what did he say?* It's funny because I tell the high school and college students when I speak to them about the right of way industry and what I do that a project is kind of boring to me if no issues come up. Basically, at that point I am just a paper pusher. I like dealing with the issues that come up and figuring out what I need to do to solve them, hence the problem solver part of the job.

## Conclusion

I have found there is really no set job description or scope for what a right of way manager is or does. The job description for a right of way manager is basically to do whatever needs to get done in order to keep the parcels moving through the process to get the parcels acquired on schedule. Personally, that is one of the aspects I like the most about my profession. Every day is a new day, and you never know what is going to pop up on a daily basis that you are going to have to deal with.

So, what does it mean to be a right of way manager? For me, it means I have a job that I absolutely love. A career that I didn't set out to have but am thankful for every day that I "fell" into it. It's a job that has allowed me to meet and work with some amazing people. A job that has provided me opportunities to travel all over the country to meet and learn from others in this same industry. Does it mean that it is stress- and frustration-free? No, but what line of work is? I do know that once I found it, I knew this was exactly where I wanted to be. And that is why I am proud say that I am a right of way manager. ☘



*Patrick McCallister, SR/WA, is the Right of Way Acquisition Manager for WSP USA Inc. in Indianapolis with 28 years of experience in the right of way industry. He is a past president of Indiana Chapter 10 and presented at the 2017 and 2018 International Education Conferences on the management of right of way acquisition. Patrick currently serves as the Region 5 Secretary/Treasurer.*