



THE PANDEMIC PANDEMONIUM

Florida Edition

BY WENDY BURCH

In March 2020, knowing little to nothing about right of way, I accepted a position in the right of way training program with the Florida Department of Transportation. Excited to have landed a job that was going to pay me to train me, I showed up that first day, enthusiastic and ready to hit the ground running.

What I could not have foreseen was what the next two years would have in store for all of us. I found myself a fish out of water, starting an entirely new career at the dawn of a global pandemic.

Three months and several quarantine precautions later, the office felt more like a ghost town with roughly 85% of the employees teleworking and learning to do their jobs from home. As part of a skeleton crew still going into the office, I spent day after day reading how-to guides, procedural documents, statutes and taking computer-based training (CBT) courses, waiting for news that the official training program would begin.

As enthralling as Florida Statute and procedural documentation may be, I found myself wondering just how crazy my decision had been to leave a perfectly comfortable job working as a paralegal at a single-attorney law practice. Yes, that job had become rote in many ways, but it was predictable and safe. There was absolutely zero doubt that every morning when I entered the building, there would be mail to open, phones to answer, some billing items to enter and likely, some briefs to eFile.





But now everything was uncertain, and yet somehow, it was still pretty boring. So, when my coworker Vincent Smith asked, “Do you want to learn how to do a field review?” I jumped at the chance. With the assistance, patience and generosity of our friend and coworker, the other right of way trainees, Kelly Budhu and Kadian Foster, and I headed out to the various parts of the five counties that comprise the area where we work.

We gathered up all the reviews and inspections that were due for the month and made plans to systematically complete them. The first project review that we would complete together took us into some interesting landscapes. We were following drainage canals in the central parts of the district in and around Pahokee, Florida.

Surrounded by various farms that stretched as far as the eye could see, we stopped to assess the spalling concrete edge at the top of the canal alongside the paved roadway. Anyone familiar with the canals of south Florida knows the types of wildlife one might encounter — gators, iguanas and birds (oh my!). As we walked along the road’s edge, the occasional iguana could be heard thrashing through the dried, overgrown grass to stay out of sight (Thankfully!). The gators, however, were sunning themselves on the banks of the canal, away from the road and a safe distance from us.

As we made our way toward the crossroad that led to town, we passed by a large sugar refinery, which stuck out like a sore thumb amid the crop fields. A massive factory with smokestacks, the perimeter of the refinery was circled by oversized trucks, likely unloading fresh batches of sugar cane.

To our west, a crop-dusting plane was weaving its way above the fields in our direction, and we agreed it was a good idea to return to our cars and move away from the now-airborne substance. As we left the area, I spotted the anhinga and egrets grazing around the canal, seemingly unbothered by the crop dusting.

As the weeks went on, we began to look forward to our trips into the field, as they took us out of the deserted office halls and into the classic Florida sunshine. While we were learning to read project plans, look for encroachments and check for improvements in the Florida DOT-owned right of way, we were also experiencing the kind of comradery, kindness and laughter that helped a group of strangers-turned-co-workers cope with the extraordinary challenges we were dealing with beyond nine to five.

Although these days took the job from interesting to exhilarating, traveling during the pandemic posed a variety of unique challenges. It took a little extra time and patience to find open restaurants and restrooms. This was especially



challenging in some of the more rural parts of the counties. Not even search engines and social media could be completely relied on to accurately inform whether a place was open, had outdoor seating available or allowed strangers to use their restroom.

Locating the nearest open restroom became a team effort that we pooled resources to complete (thank goodness for Google and a variety of cell phone services). Between the spotty coverage in remote locations, multiple people battling “hanger” and the net results of trying to stay hydrated in the heat of a Florida day, the stakes were high and consequences dire. There were some real “beat-the-clock” moments for sure.

Eventually, we each learned to pack a daily travel kit that a survivalist heading on a three-month hike through the wilderness would envy. There wasn’t a soap-free, waterless way to cleanse a hand that wasn’t accounted for in triplicate. Our cars were loaded with everything one would expect to see in a panic room, fallout shelter or well-stocked basement of a doomsday prepper.

Looking back now, I am so grateful to my coworkers who helped me to not just survive a truly unique and crazy time, but also to thrive in it. I’d also like to take this time to give a shoutout to CVS, Walgreens and Publix — all of which were among our preferred pit stops to stave off the treacherous hanger spells and desperate bathroom emergencies. 🚻



Wendy Burch joined the Florida Department of Transportation in March 2020 as a right of way trainee in the property management team. She became a licensed real estate agent while completing the two-year training program. After graduating from the program, she moved into the production team and began working on right of way acquisition and relocation. Wendy is a current member of IRWA Chapter 26.