

'New Age' Strategy: Embracing the Need to Lead

By John Luthy, Ph.D.

On Jan. 22, Luthy, president of The Futures Corp., Boise, Idaho, and American Public Works Association (APWA) president Dwayne Kalynchuck co-hosted a live, 2-hour Web broadcast on "Leadership in the New Age of Public Works." The article below has been adapted from a version that first appeared in the May 2003 issue of APWA Reporter.

Say what you will about the future, the only thing now that we can predict with absolute certainty is that it is not going to be easy.

Perhaps never before have so many potent variables converged on a finite public system that sees its cherished infrastructure as the most obvious reflection of its political and economic success. Growing scrutiny, escalating public expectations, stagnant economic growth, global competition, and the growing specter of terrorism all have combined to hamper funding and reduce the inclination to reinvest in fundamental services.

To say the least, progress may be slow and will perhaps be measured by how well the status quo is maintained as populations grow, congestion becomes more severe, structures age, and other systems are taxed beyond prudent limits. But, there is another view that simultaneously offers hope as we all now face arguably the most profound metamorphosis in history.

HOPE ON THE GLOBAL HORIZON

Since 1995, the competitive world economy has grown from \$4 trillion to close to \$25 trillion. The worldwide economic engine may sputter at times, but is clearly beginning to achieve the characteristics of a global marketplace that will drastically alter

traditional boundaries and attitudes. Once most societies taste a life made possible through economic progress, they will do little to jeopardize it. Rather, most tend to accelerate toward contemporary social structures—beginning first with a basic physical infrastructure.

In this context, public works and projects become a structural framework critical to successful government and industry. The United States is only one among many countries that have established a broad public infrastructure that supports the central cultural and economic elements of society. Many more are actively developing new roads, bridges, railways, water and waste treatment facilities, dams for flood control and hydroelectric power, safe housing, and irrigation systems. It is important work because it is laying the essential foundation for a new century of growth,



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development, and worldwide progress.

One illustration of the growing public works emphasis is the December 2003 announcement by the European Union of \$75 billion worth of joint public works projects. Almost half will be dedicated to transportation projects and the rest will be split among energy, communications, and development of special technologies. In Europe, Asia, Africa, and the West, there can be little doubt now that a new era in public works has begun.

GUSTS OF CHANGE

Worldwide, public works professionals at all levels must now simultaneously meet enormous and escalating challenges while recasting the profession to prepare for even more of them. The upside is exciting and exhilarating. There will be more opportunities for collaboration and consolidation; new organization models

will emerge as we learn to work differently and more efficiently; emphasis will be on flexibility and innovation, using widely dispersed operations with more autonomy; and professional development and training will quickly gain prominence as talent becomes harder to recruit and retain.

As time advances, we will see dazzling new innovations and technological advancements virtually every year. New challenges will emerge as problems become more complex and carry even greater potential for negative impact. This will generate greater regional and global cooperation as the best minds share ideas and solutions. From so much trial and challenge, the profession will emerge stronger than ever, with more stature and support—even if needed

budgetary adjustments are slow to catch up.

Demand will continue to escalate—bad news for those departments and programs already overwhelmed with projects. A dichotomy exists here, not only in the United States but in many other countries as well. Funds are growing more finite as economies falter and struggle toward recovery since Sept. 11, 2001.

All available data indicates the public's thirst for expanded infrastructure continues unabated even with limited fiscal and human resources. And, this expansion continues at a time when the existing infrastructure is deteriorating in many areas 8 percent to 12 percent faster than it can be replaced or repaired. In the United States alone, the estimated cost of repairing existing infrastructure now stands at \$300 billion to \$500 billion. Worldwide, this number could exceed \$3 trillion to \$5 trillion

BECOMING MORE PROACTIVE

Abroad and at home, stressed communities tend to seek leadership, clarity, and direction from local professionals. In my view, there are no better leaders than the broad array of public works managers, engineers, and planners that work in virtually every state and municipal government. It would appear, however, that the field of public works has traditionally been somewhat reactive to elected and appointed officials, walking a thin line between wish lists and reality.

While there is a tendency toward long-term facility planning, most public works agencies have developed a culture that reacts to public or political demand, community growth, or insufficient systems. This must change.

As the future unfolds, I urge public works leaders to become much more proactive in taking on several important new roles:

Community Builders—Assume a more active role in broad-spectrum community planning, serve on more councils and committees, keeping “agendas for improvement” within the community. Far too often disconnects exist between public works agencies and the public stemming from a lack of understanding and perspective. Take the lead ... don't follow the pack.

Creators of “Place”—Within the context of urban planning there is an emerging emphasis on creating a sense of “place” that blends all aspects of community living to sus-

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tain an environment where people want to live, work, and interact. Public works leaders must become more aware of this trend and actively promote it.

Forum Providers—Stature and leadership accrues to those who call meetings and create forums for exchange. There is perhaps no greater emerging role for public works. As a discipline and profession, it is in the best position to recognize agendas and create opportunities for exchange among many community elements. Don't wait to be invited. Call the meetings.

Planning Experts—Strategic planning is both art and science, yet very few people in the public sector have been properly trained in strategic thinking and planning. At the senior

level and throughout every organization, staffs must be properly trained in strategic planning. It will pay enormous dividends in organization efficiency, effectiveness, collaboration, and in the ability of the organization to lead in the community.

Analysts and Scenario Builders—Who better to provide analysis and construct scenarios of the future? Far too often, analysis is clinical and data driven, yet fails to offer various predicted outcomes for consideration. Public works can assume the critically important task of long-range scenario development for the community, creating multi-dimensional models that frame new options and opportunities.

Historians—Infrastructure creates its own continuum, with older structures and processes giving way to new ones. Structures and facilities within a community are quite different from social and administrative services, some of which come and go almost overnight. The very best public works organizations have a sense of history ... offering the community a real foundation for future development that merges long-term growth with existing facilities. After all, someone has to make sense of it all.

Above all, the message here is not that any of this will be easy. Evolution never is. But it is time for the field of public works to enter a new era of strategic leadership that allows it to make even greater contributions to the global community. In difficult times, communities look for thoughtful leadership. I believe the public works profession must be prepared to assume that role. **PW**

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