

Gazing Ahead, With the Benefit of Hindsight

In honor of this year's National Public Works Week, May 16–22, we invited well-known public works futurist John F. Luthy to offer some insight on what lies ahead in the coming decades for public works professionals. Based on many conversations with interested parties across the country, what follows is Luthy's "best guess" at what advice future generations (circa 2075 to 2100) might have to offer.



Last fall, drought conditions in Nevada dropped the level of Lake Mead by 90 feet, as shown here by the newly exposed wall face.

of the importance of our message.

As a profession, public works has for many generations been an essential element of society and community culture. But, looking back, we can now see that the enormous challenges you face in 2004, and the decisions they force, will prove pivotal in shaping the decades

that had lasted for only around 200 to 300 years. Geologic core samples revealed that the weather since the early 1800s had been much wetter than for many thousands of years and was returning to its normal annual rainfall pattern, which was up to 40% less than estimates based on data collected through the 1900s.

However, in their haste to justify development, many communities had ignored very clear indications that there would be far too little water to support the higher level of planned growth. So, as weather patterns began returning to a historic norm while consumption grew, seasonal snowmelt and rainfall proved insufficient to replenish the West's large reservoirs such as Lake Mead and Lake Powell. More broadly, changing national weather patterns also rapidly altered precipitation levels, creating shortages for hundreds of communities that had taken water supplies for granted.

As the depth of this crisis began to emerge, these communities discovered that funding shortages and homeland security concerns had diverted resources away from new aqueducts, wells, and purification systems. Over time, many areas experienced severe droughts, a phenomenon now known as "predictable surprise."

Water was and remains the lifeblood of all communities. While there is still time to make a difference, pub-

We appreciate your willingness to take some quiet time in the midst of your hectic lives to read and reflect on our message. In our view, there is much to be shared and perhaps even more to be gained from new perspectives about the future. As you consider these thoughts, realize that we have the advantage of hindsight. The very real impact of decisions made in your day, long before our time, are constant reminders

to come. With that in mind, let's focus on three key areas of paramount concern: water supply, transportation, and climate change.

WATER SUPPLY

Paleontologists working with geologists and paleohydrologists in your time discovered that predicted precipitation and stream flows in the southwestern United States were based on anomalies in weather patterns

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lic works leaders in your day must become much more active in water source planning and conservation. Gather, study, and share relevant data. Draw sensible conclusions and help your elected officials make the right decisions. Water rights will become

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innovative parking. Active commitment to light rail transit and dual-mode systems, however, began far too late in the United States and are just now beginning to fulfill their promise—generations past where both should have become essential elements of our society.

Ironically, developing countries have had the opportunity to create more balanced transportation systems from the outset and many now far outperform those in this country. Sadly, virtually all of our current issues were predictable in your time. Growing fuel use and larger vehicle fleets have escalated traffic congestion, smog, accidents, urban sprawl, deforestation, noise pollution, and rising global temperatures. The direct financial impact that pollution had on public health annually in 2004 is now in the hundreds of billions of dollars as we near 2100.

Some time ago, building more and more roads was finally recognized as a poor solution to easing traffic congestion, but transportation politics even now remains volatile and difficult. With the benefit of our hindsight, we now urge you to develop both light rail and dual mode guideways, key elements

of a national transportation system, and to pursue them aggressively in your time. Further delay on your part will just exacerbate issues for generations to come. Solutions are reasonably clear. The question is whether there is leadership, clarity, and fortitude to see them through.

SOME GOOD NEWS

Technology has brought many new options for solid waste removal and disposal. Landfill issues have become less of a challenge due to use of genetically engineered biological agents, better conservation, and exceptional recycling programs. Similarly, almost all vehicles and equipment of any size now have built-in global positioning systems (GPS) and many personal items such as billfolds and keys come with GPS devices. Very little is truly “lost” these days.

Public works touches virtually every aspect of society and in many ways provides the fundamental framework for public safety and security, public health, economic development, and social well-being. Our historic personality has been to work quietly with great purpose, but often to our detriment as our talent and leadership went unnoticed while our services remained under funded and under appreciated.

We realize that you face tremendously complex challenges in 2004 and that the potential for meaningful change often seems illusory. Trust us when we say it is not. With all of its hardship, challenge, and frustration this is still a wonderful, beautiful planet that is worth preserving. We understand that, with all the noise, demand, and barriers, there are many opportunities to take the easy path.

But proper choices, commitment, and tenacity in your time will ensure that future generations have at least a fighting chance to carry your legacy forward with conviction, insight, and hopeful optimism. **PW**

—Luthy is president of The Futures Corp, Boise, Idaho, and a member of the World Future Society. He is a leading consultant in the field of public works planning and leadership development. He can be reached at futurescorp@aol.com.

This is an abridged version of the author’s full text, which is available at www.pwmag.com.



Larger vehicle fleets, growing fuel use, and resulting pollution will ultimately harm public health unless practical steps are taken now to develop light-rail transit and other dual-mode alternatives.

a huge battle ... do not shrink from this issue. It is just too important.

TRANSPORTATION

We must report that congestion continues to plague urban areas and continues to be addressed through better transit, smaller cars, and more