

# Ostrowski's Outlook XLIX

By now you already know the outcome of the Phun with Philosophy session at the Spring Conference if you attended the session. If you're one of the 1,333 who didn't make it to Vancouver, here is a brief summary of the results.

## Past-President

and current Delegate Dick McKinley narrowly defeated President-for-life Jill Marilley in the contest to determine audience responses to the seven philosophical questions.

Here's a statement of the group's philosophy of public works based on the vote totals.

1. Public works officials should be stewards of the environment.
2. Public works is part of a complex economy and public works officials should foster more transparent priority setting for capital projects and maintenance.
3. We should be leaders locally, regionally and nationally.
4. We need to be better trained in and more appreciative of aesthetics.
5. Engineering is only part of a public works official's responsibility and different agencies will have varied needs for the level of engineering knowledge required.
6. Public works officials need to be financial experts.
7. Public works managers should run effective operations and motivate people to get the best out of them.

Throughout this whole exercise I proposed options for your consideration but I kept my opinions to myself. Some of you might have tried to read between the lines and divine my opinions by the way I



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set up the alternatives. Well, the suspense is over. Here's what I think.

**The environment:** Worrying about our planet is something new for human beings. I don't think we fully appreciated what we're dealing with until we went into space and looked back at this big blue

ball. I tried to lay out some of the issues for consideration in Outlook XLIII but the bottom line is that we are builders and builders disturb the planet. We should disturb only what's necessary and not be careless. We also should start to establish ourselves as experts on real environmental cost accounting. I don't mean just trying to be carbon neutral. I mean seriously questioning the price of our quality of life. If all the pollution and exploitation of the weak takes place in a foreign land it's still a cost and we should be keeping a tally. And we need to be more vocal about criticizing the evil cost shifters.

On the other hand, some environmental regulations are just a waste of time and effort. Some even make things worse. We need to be more vocal about that too.

**The economy:** Cities need plentiful water supplies to grow. Cities need solid transportation networks to prosper. The other things we do in public works fall more into the category of housekeeping. We need sewage treatment to prevent disease, but cleaning up after ourselves doesn't grow the economy.

**Leadership:** This is our weakest area. I know many great public works leaders. I know of not one single public works official who is a national figure.



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We're good people and we're shy; two disqualifying characteristics for celebrity. Before you criticize my use of that word, note that celebrity and celebration come from the same Latin root. The world doesn't celebrate public works leaders like it used to.

**Aesthetics:** Sometimes I think we're too functional and other times I think we try too hard to dress up our projects with figurative gingerbread. The American freeway is generally a stark joyless place. Colored concrete on sound walls doesn't do it for me. Frank Lloyd Wright was trained as an engineer so there still may be hope for us.

**Engineers as public works directors:** The job governs. End of memo. Most public works directors do something other than engineering on a daily basis. This topic keeps coming up so I put it into the hopper for discussion. What surprised me in the Vancouver session was that this view got the second highest majority at 87%. I was surprised because most of the people in the audience were engineers.

I think the people who keep raising this issue are engineers who don't feel comfortable with the other skills required of a public works director. Clearly, the people who attended the session were willing to examine assumptions and had enough confidence in their abilities to view this as a non-issue.

So the next time you hear this topic brought up by someone who says public works directors have to be engineers, treat them kindly. They're insecure and don't need confrontation in their lives.

**Finance:** If you don't know how to get money for your public works department, you aren't doing your job.

**Progressive management:** We shouldn't be jerks and we shouldn't tolerate jerks. Our job is to motivate people and solve problems. The only way were going to do that is to create a positive, confirming culture in the organizations we lead.

Fear and intimidation leads to Enron. We don't need that.

When I started this discussion and started taking votes on the various philosophical views, I didn't intend to proclaim a public works philosophy determined by majority rule. At that, even *consensus gentium* isn't necessarily the best way to resolve philosophical questions.

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The votes are useful for something else, however. They tell us that we're not close to consensus on any of this.

The environmental question was resolved by a 33 to 16 vote. I purposely

wrote the choice that lost to be more anthropocentric than the other choice. Most of us apparently are tree huggers but it's significant that about 31% of us think that human needs should play a

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larger role than they do in environmental decisions.

This is no small issue. I think we dance around this thing almost every day. We make statements as if we all spoke with one voice but we aren't anywhere near unanimity on the environment, let alone sustainability.

The answer to the second question on the role of public works in the economy won by an even smaller margin of 28 to 20. Maybe the question wasn't as clear as it might be and that could have led to some of the split opinion. I think my view is right but I don't expect it to be shared by even half of the public works community.

We probably need to spend more time discussing that one.

The answer to the third question on leadership had national leadership winning by a 34 to 13 vote over organizational leadership. Another close vote that tells us more about our lack of agreement than it does about what the right answer might be. As I said above, we don't have national public works leaders. Until more of us think that's an important void to fill, we won't see many, if any, national public works leaders.

The question on good design caused the audience to question the goodness of the design of the question. Being better trained in aesthetics won the day by a vote of 26 to 7. That sounds like a strong vote until we tell the whole story. I haven't mentioned the vote for the third alternative in all of the previous questions because until now that vote wasn't significant. In this case, it is very significant. Seventeen people voted for the third choice which means that they didn't like the first two choices and believed that there had to be a better way to describe our role as artists.

The engineering vote was 47 to 1 with 6 votes for some other description. As I said above, this vote surprised me but pleasantly so.


The vote on financial skills for public works officials was 28 to 18. That's almost identical to the vote on the role of public works in the economy and tells me that opinions on our financial role are pretty well divided.

For the progressive management question, evidently the audience took my "tough and respected" as code for jerks in option two which lost by a vote of 50 to 0. This is the closest we came to *consensus gentium* but even then there were six people who voted for the third, un-described option.

I should point out that the third option (which was: None of the above) got 3; 3; 6; 17; 6; 7; 6 votes (respectively) leading me to guess that there were possibly three people in the audience who didn't like any of my choices and they picked up a few more supporters along the way. As I mentioned earlier, the vote on question four that got 17 votes tells me that the question was probably poorly written.

So that's where we stand today. 📊

As usual, comments suggestions and anything else can be sent to me at [ostrowj@pacifier.com](mailto:ostrowj@pacifier.com)



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