

Ostrowski's Outlook

Why are we here?

That's one of the classic philosophical questions and, as it turns out, it's a question that APWA asked itself recently. The practical answer that was arrived at is shown in the new strategic plan in the November issue of the "Reporter".

In the October issue I wrote an article related to the philosophical aspect of the "why are we here?" question.

In that article I pointed out the philosophical difference between Eastern and Western thinking. Western thinking says that nature must be conquered and Eastern thinking says that we must recognize our place as part of nature. Because we as public works professionals build things we've always found ourselves at odds with Eastern thinking environmentalists who want to coexist with every endangered species. We've found ourselves on the side of the builders who want to do things the old, unsustainable way. If we're going to embrace sustainability as a new, better way to build for the future we have to resolve that dilemma and come up with a public works philosophy that embraces designing with nature in a way that benefits all mankind for generations to come.

APWA President-elect George Crombie read my article and asked my Leadership and Management Committee to see if we could come up with that "Public Works Philosophy". So that's what I'm going to try to do and I'm going to start by discussing this with you. That means that I'm going to say some things and then you're going to say some things and then we'll try to resolve our differences and then we'll have something that we can expose to further public ridicule.

I'd like to start by back tracking on something I said in the Reporter article. I talked about Eastern and Western thinking and while I think that's generally a good way to label the opposing viewpoints, I also think that such a broad label could send us down the path of discussing exceptions to the general statement. Not all Western thinking is the same nor is all Eastern thinking submissive to nature. Some would even argue that Western civilization has its foundation in Eastern religions.

So let's just focus on the two opposing points of view and call them something descriptive to distinguish between them.

Let's also not characterize the difference as the difference between an anthropocentric and a nature-centered view of the world. The only species on this planet having this discussion is us and if we're honest with ourselves we have to view both views as anthropocentric because we're really talking about the way we want the world to look to make us happy even if we choose the low impact natural approach to life on this planet. A common question that's asked

is “what kind of world do you want to leave to your grandchildren?” The question isn’t “what kind of a world do you want to leave to your dogs and cats?” That question isn’t asked because only the purely saintly feel that way.

As it now stands the far ends of the spectrum on this question are fairly easy to describe. The pure preservationist wants nothing built by humans to destroy anything produced by nature. The pure consumer wants all of nature’s bounty to be directed toward human use even if that means using up the resources.

There is considerable middle ground between those two views. Unfortunately, that middle ground has been a battleground during my entire career. The rabid environmentalists who want to stop the world have never been able to stop the world. They must be very sad. The proponents of unlimited development have never been able to reshape the earth unimpeded. They must be very sad.

They all must be sad because on the one hand, the environmentalist has to feel like he or she is fighting a losing battle while the advocates of unfettered development are met with challenges and delays at every step along the way.

We in public works are builders and operators of that built environment. We provide useful environmental repair with our sewage treatment plants and our natural habitat restorations. But most of the time we’re building roads that get filled up with cars that pollute and building communities of people who give off gases and excrete pollutants in enormous quantities.

Maybe we can see if there’s a middle ground by examining what we all sort of believe. We hold some truths to be self evident. They’re actually not self evident but we hold them any way. Here are some of them.

- Pay me now or pay me later means that it’s better to invest in timely maintenance because it’s less expensive in the long run.
- Efficiently run water, sewer, drainage and transportation systems are better than systems that are run to satisfy political needs.
- Natural drainage systems are better than piped systems.

That’s just a start and already I’m slipping into some areas that might not be commonly shared beliefs.

There are also some beliefs we have that we don’t get to voice too often that I think are worth considering in this nature vs. builder discussion. Here are a few.

- Environmental impact statements and the paper they’re written on have probably killed more trees than any environmental improvement that resulted from the process.
- The delay caused by environmental and social reviews results in more expensive projects so that there’s less money available to build more good projects.

- Stopping projects doesn't cure environmental problems especially if the project is some sort of water purification endeavor.

What I've just listed sounds like campaign talking points for an anti-environmental movement. Actually, I wouldn't like that but I think it's important to get how we really feel out on the table. Maybe if we discuss it we'll find we really don't feel that way or maybe our opinions can't be supported. For example, I've seen several attempts to identify the cost increase associated with environmental requirements on projects. I've never felt the results of those reviews could be of much use because the basic question is never asked. That question is, "how much environmental review is enough?" Another way of stating that is to say that there are many rules and regulations that we have to follow to do what we should have done anyway. The necessary rules shouldn't be looked at as an additional project cost but a basic project cost.

This reminds me of a basic economic problem we have with environmental protection. Our free market society often doesn't include the whole cost of something in the purchase price. I observed this when I was doing solid waste planning and could see that landfills were cheap to operate because they weren't being run properly. Once all of the appropriate environmental controls became part of landfill operation we started to approach the actual cost of disposal.

Maybe we can resolve some of these conflicts by looking at the basic job of a public works official. I've contended for some time that we are here to solve problems and motivate people. Maybe our shared philosophy can be found in how we solve problems. If we look at environmental damage as a problem, how do we go about solving the problem?

The typical environmentalist might say that we should stop doing what we're doing while the typical engineer might say that we need to build projects to fix things. They both might be right.

Thirty years ago I had the pleasure of working with a management consulting firm from Colorado called Brisco, Maphis, Murray and Lamont. They were former Boulder officials who went into business together. They pointed out to me that stopping things and building things are both inadequate ways to solve problems. They used the image of a big pot of problems that had a continual stream of new problems falling into it from out of the sky. If you took the approach of building your way out of problems you never got done because as soon as you eliminated one problem, two or three more fell into the pot. On the other hand, if you just put a lid on the pot so that no new problems came in, you're left with a pot full of problems. The obvious solution is to put a lid on the pot to keep new problems from falling in and then start solving each of the problems in the pot until all your problems are solved.

So maybe what we need are a very few tough environmental laws to keep new problems from forming while we pick away at a prioritized list of projects that make this a better world.

Of course this would require us to come up with a definition of what a better world looks like which might get us right back to the nature vs. builder question.

But I'm going to stop here because I think I've given you enough to chew on to start your part of this discussion.

All you need to do is form your thoughts into some sort of reaction to what I've said. Feel free to agree or disagree or to have a better idea but do let me know what you think. I'll be compiling the responses in my next Outlook article and then we'll see if we can bring this thing to some sort of closure. Keep in mind, however, that there are two kinds of discussions, practical and philosophical. A practical discussion has to end with a result while a philosophical discussion can go on forever. We don't have that long so we'll have to try to come with a practical philosophy that covers most of what we need to cover so that the forever discussions are only about refinements. At least that's my hope.

As usual, comments suggestions and anything else can be sent to me at ostrowj@pacifier.com