

Your Private Locator is Capable of More than Marking Lines

By Grant Prairie - President/Executive Director, NAPUA

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INTRODUCTION: DELIVERING VALUE

The private locate industry has spent decades being defined by the service it provides rather than the value it delivers. Ask most contractors why they hire a private locate company and the answer is usually the same: to identify and mark privately-owned utility lines before we dig. While technically correct, that answer no longer reflects what many experienced private locate professionals actually contribute to a project.

The privately-owned utility lines marked on the ground are only one part of the deliverable. The greater value often lies in everything that happens before the paint is applied and the conversations that take place after the locate has been completed. Those conversations can influence excavation methods, determine where buried facilities should be exposed first, identify conflicts between utility records and field conditions, and ultimately prevent a buried facility strike that might otherwise have occurred. This is where private locating merges with damage prevention risk mitigation practices.

THE INVESTIGATIVE PROCESS

The underground environment on private property has changed dramatically over the past three decades. Commercial developments, industrial facilities, hospitals, universities, data centers, manufacturing plants, and large residential properties now contain multiple generations of electrical distribution systems, communications pathways, natural gas systems, domestic water systems, fire protection networks, irrigation systems, sanitary sewers, storm drainage systems, and countless undocumented or abandoned buried facilities. Renovations, additions, emergency repairs, and tenant improvements have created subsurface environments that are often significantly different from the original construction drawings. In many cases, the people responsible for managing these properties have inherited buried utility infrastructure they know very little about.

Locating buried utility infrastructure within these environments has become an investigative process rather than simply a technical exercise. The level of investigation depends on the complexity of the site and the scope of the locate request. A residential client asking for a single domestic water service to be identified requires a very different approach than a shopping mall, hospital, airport, university campus, or industrial facility where the objective is to identify all buried utility infrastructure before major ground disturbance begins. Before the first signal is applied, experienced private locate professionals are already gathering information. Where Subsurface Utility Engineering (SUE) records or previous investigations exist, they review and incorporate that information into their locate strategy. Where those records do not exist, many experienced private locate professionals instinctively perform what NAPUA refers to as Tailgate SUE. Before beginning the locate, they request available utility records, review previous locate reports, interview site personnel, identify visible utility appurtenances, and evaluate how the site has developed over time to get a quick overview of how the buried utility infrastructure was likely installed. Only then do they begin the locate.

That investigative process continues throughout the locate. Rather than simply tracing buried facilities, an experienced private locate professional continually evaluates whether the available information supports the conclusions being reached in the field. Does the electrical distribution system correspond with the transformer locations? Is there any private gas on the property? Does the water system align with meters, valves and building services? Are communications pathways entering the building where they should? Why does a utility record show a buried facility that cannot be located, or why has a buried facility been identified where no records exist? Those questions are not answered by electromagnetic locating or ground penetrating radar alone. They are answered through experience, critical thinking, and an understanding of how buried utility infrastructure is designed, constructed, and maintained.



Unfortunately, many contractors never benefit from that experience because they view the locate as a completed task rather than the beginning of a discussion. Once the buried facilities have been marked and the locate report delivered, everyone assumes the investigation is finished. In reality, that is often the ideal time to walk the project with the locator and discuss what was found, what could not be confirmed, where limitations exist, and whether additional investigation should be completed before excavation begins. The paint on the ground identifies buried utility infrastructure. It does not eliminate uncertainty.

Over the years, I have found that many clients naturally began asking questions that had very little to do with locating. They wanted to know what they need to pothole first. They wanted to understand why one buried facility could not be identified with the same level of confidence as another. They asked whether public locate markings appeared reasonable, whether undocumented buried facilities were likely present, and whether their dig or drill plan should change because of what had been discovered during the private locate investigation. Those discussions rarely appeared in the scope of work, yet they often became the most valuable part of the entire project because they helped clients understand and manage the risk associated with ground disturbance.

EVOLUTION OF PRIVATE LOCATING

Looking back, I don't believe the private locate profession changed overnight. It evolved gradually as projects became more complicated and clients demanded more than a map and a series of paint marks. Experienced private locate professionals naturally expanded their role because the information available to contractors was often incomplete. They began interpreting utility records, explaining technology limitations, identifying residual risk, recommending additional investigation, and helping Ground Disturbance Professionals make better decisions before excavation began. The challenge is that our industry still tends to describe these professionals by the technical service they perform rather than the broader value they provide. The term private locator accurately describes someone who locates privately owned buried utility infrastructure. It does not fully describe the professional who helps contractors interpret that information, communicate the uncertainty that remains, and manage the risk associated with ground disturbance.

Recognizing this evolution, the North American Private Utility Association (NAPUA) has defined this broader professional function through its Best Practices, Guidelines, and training curriculum. NAPUA refers to this expanded role as the Private Locate Damage Prevention Specialist. The designation is not intended to replace the private locator profession or diminish the importance of locating privately owned buried utility infrastructure. Rather, it recognizes that many experienced private locate professionals already perform responsibilities that extend well beyond locating. They investigate, interpret, communicate, and help Ground Disturbance Professionals manage the operational risk associated with ground disturbance. Our objective is not to redefine the private locate industry, but to help qualified private locate contractors and their customers better understand the expanded value these professionals provide by sharing the investigative processes, technical knowledge, and risk management practices that experienced professionals have developed over decades in the field.

THE DAMAGE PREVENTION LIFECYCLE

None of this changes the critical role performed by utility owners, One Call systems, contract locators, engineers, or Subsurface Utility Engineering professionals. Each remains an essential part of the modern damage prevention lifecycle. Likewise, responsibility for making the final decision to proceed with ground disturbance always rests with the Ground Disturbance Professional. It is their responsibility to evaluate the available information, determine whether it is sufficient for the planned work, and decide whether excavation can proceed safely.



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There are, however, many situations where the available information raises questions or additional expertise is required. Public locate markings may not align with field conditions, utility records may conflict, privately owned buried utility infrastructure may be undocumented, or the limitations identified at the time of the locate may create uncertainty. In these situations, many Ground Disturbance Professionals already turn to private locate contractors for guidance.

Where concerns involve public locate markings or the response provided through the 811 or One Call system, those concerns should always be escalated through the appropriate utility owner or One Call process for resolution. A qualified Private Locate Damage Prevention Specialist does not replace that process. Rather, they help the Ground Disturbance Professional recognize potential issues, interpret the available information, explain locate limitations, identify residual risk, and recommend additional investigative or risk mitigation measures while the appropriate parties work toward resolution. The Ground Disturbance Professional remains responsible for the final decision to proceed, but they should know they now have another experienced resource to help them make a more informed one.

Experienced private locate professionals have been fulfilling this role for years. Their clients already rely on them for guidance that extends well beyond locating privately owned buried utility infrastructure. Conversations such as, "The 811 locates are complete, but something doesn't look right. Can you come take a look?" or "The locate report says this line couldn't be located. What should we do?" are common questions asked of us on projects across North America.

GOING BEYOND THE MARKS

It is time the industry recognized that many qualified Private Locate Contractors provide far more than locate marks. They understand the regional laws, industry best practices, and technical guidelines that govern ground disturbance, and they provide the experience, judgment, and risk management advice that helps Ground Disturbance Professionals make better decisions before excavation begins.

The next time you hire a private locate company, don't let the conversation end when the locate report is handed over. Walk the site together and question their locate. Ask what concerns them, where the greatest uncertainty exists, what limitations they encountered and whether the buried utility infrastructure identified during the investigation tells the same story as the available records. You may discover that the greatest value your private locator provides has never been the paint on the ground. It has been the knowledge and experience that helps everyone go home safely at the end of the day.

Your private locator Is capable of more than marking lines. ★

About the Author

Grant Prairie CET, DPT, ULT, has spent more than 36 years helping organizations reduce the risk of utility damage as a Damage Prevention Specialist, engineering consultant, trainer, and expert witness. As the owner of multiple private utility locating companies in both Canada and the United States, he has gained broad experience in utility locating, damage investigations, engineering support, and excavation risk management. He is the Executive Director of the North American Private Utility Association (NAPUA), where he leads the development of best practices, guidelines, and educational curriculums focused on improving damage prevention and the safe management of buried utility infrastructure across North America.

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