CA Underground Safety Board, Planning & Design Request

ROLE: Natural Gas Utility Operator, LDC

Early-Stage Planning

1. Challenges:

Replacement, new business, and relocation projects

* Existing underground infrastructure (electric, water, telecom, etc.) may not be accurately mapped.
* Utility congestion in densely packed areas, crossings near major infrastructure (railways, waterways, highways, etc.)
* Impact: Increases the risk of utility strikes, unplanned delays, and costly redesigns.
* Delays in permitting, especially from state agencies (e.g. Caltrans), and environmental impact assessments or wildfire permits
* Abandoned utilities presents challenges in routing new infrastructure, also creates uncertainty in routing new gas lines

1. Who should be involved?
   1. Utility operators (we have maps, records, etc.)
   2. Engineering and Design firms (they need access to reliable information to plan around existing utilities)
   3. Excavation contractors (They provide insight into what information is actually available and useful in the field and highlight where disconnects happen between design and reality.)
   4. Local/ state transportation and public works depts. (ROW issues may arise, they coordinate permitting, and may also limit or control access to utility corridors)
   5. CARCGA committees where applicable( subject matter expertise across a wide variety of disciplines)
   6. One-call centers (they facilitate the one-call process from start to finish of project)
   7. Public safety officials (fire dept, emergency mgmt., safety professionals; all help to prioritize risk reduction)

Design Requests (Focus: For purposes of these requests, a design request is an informal request for utility records using operator contact information provided by the Regional Notification Centers. Under the Dig Safe Act, operators are not currently required to respond to these requests or meet specific quality or timing standards).

1. Design requests (Submitters)
   1. As an LDC (project owner), design requests are usually submitted by Engineering dept. or a 3rd party firm contracted/ outsourced to conduct design activities on our behalf
   2. How does your organization approach who submits the design request, and is it working the way you believe it should? How might limiting design requests to “qualified” submitters either benefit or harm the workflow?
      * + Design requests are currently submitted by authorized personnel within the Engineering Department, including Supervisors, Engineers, and Engineering Technicians. The submission process is guided by project location and scope, with authorization base on an individual’s qualifications and their ability to oversee projects, as determined by Engineering management. This process is functioning effectively third-party contractors and external firms consistently receive and submit all necessary design information.
        + Limiting design requests to a smaller group of “qualified” individuals could enhance consistency and deepen systemic knowledge within that group. However, this approach may also hinder workflow efficiency. Relying on a limited number of submitters could create bottlenecks, especially during peak periods or when those individuals are managing other priorities.
   3. Have operators required the submitter of a design request to have certain qualifications in the past? What were / are those requirements? Did the operator explain why?
      * + Design requests are submitted by authorized individuals in the Engineering Department, including Supervisors, Engineers, and Engineering Technicians. Each of these roles requires training, education, and utility experience to ensure safety, reliability, and customer service. Operators have required the submitter of a design request to have certain qualifications in the past.
        + These qualifications typically include relevant educational background, and practical experience in utility operations and engineering. The requirements are in place to ensure that the individuals submitting design requests have the necessary expertise to oversee projects effectively and to maintain high standards of safety and reliability.
        + Operators have explained that these qualifications are necessary to ensure that the design requests are accurate, comprehensive, and feasible. By requiring qualified individuals to submit design requests, operators aim to minimize errors, streamline the approval process, and ensure that all pertinent design information is considered. This approach helps in maintaining the integrity of the design process and supports the successful execution of projects.

Design Requests (Timing)

1. When (e.g., planning phase, before construction bidding and subsurface utility field investigations), and how far in advance of excavation does your organization first request design information, and does this process work the way you believe it should? Do contracts for the project (design-build, design-bid build, etc.) affect the process? How?
   * + - The request for pertinent design information is one of the first steps in the design process. Once the overall project scope and locations have been determined and verified, all pertinent design information (e.g., utility locations, municipality documentation, ROW verification) is requested to begin designing the project. This information directly impacts the design, and the timeline for receiving it can vary drastically depending on the operator.
       - The request for design is requested months in advance of excavation or construction. The process can be affected by various elements when coordinating with third-party contractors or outsource firms, including contract agreements (which may impact what design information they are contractually obligated to obtain), design bidding for larger projects (where timeline and coordination with multiple contractors may impact how and when we obtain pertinent design information and who is contractually obligated to obtain it), and project type/scheduling (where a project may need to be completed within a few months or weeks of its initiation). All these factors affect the timeline in advance of excavation for requesting and obtaining this information.

Design Requests (Content)

1. In your experience, what information (e.g., designer’s / design consultant’s contact information, location and project limits, description of project scope, traffic control, and site access information for operators’ locating staff) about the project must you provide to an operator in order to receive design information? Is there information about projects that you would like an operator to know and respond to that is currently ignored? If so, what is it? Is there information you are required to provide that you think is not needed? If so, what is it?
   * + - When submitting design information, the process can vary depending on the operator. Some may require a portal account and submission on their website, while others may just need an email and a standard request form. However, most operators require the same information for design request submittals. At a minimum, we submit requestor contact information, design timeline parameters, and a description of the overall scope and locations of the project to ensure all pertinent design information is received. Additionally, we often provide traffic control plans and site access information for the operator's locating staff.
       - It is uncommon for a design request to be ignored or not obtain the needed information. However, the most common issues include timelines for a request, which can take anywhere from 3 days to even 8 weeks to receive; lack of clarity of requirements to streamline the receival process, where nuances in the operator's approval process can extend the lead time; and quality issues pertaining to accuracy or a lack of information on the operator's current infrastructure, such as receiving outdated As-Builts or documentation without dimensions or clear callouts. These factors can significantly impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the design process.