

Foundation Drilling No. 2/MY TWO BITS

What Hurricane Katrina did to New Orleans was horrible. What made it particularly devastating for me was the infrastructure construction industry's failure – unwillingness – to agitate for the changes that would have prevented probably 90% of the damage and its grim aftermath. I know the infrastructure construction industry and the professions and occupations it comprises. I've worked with them for close to 40 years and I have to ask, "What's wrong with you?" It's not like the devastation was not predicted; it was. Just about everyone knew what would happen were "the big one" to hit. Worse, the infrastructure construction industry had the added benefit of knowing exactly what had to be done to have prevented the loss of life, injury, economic ruin, and homelessness that occurred. Just look at what happened in Galveston, Texas, where the infrastructure construction industry literally raised the city after the hurricane of 1900, so that, when the city was battered by the equally powerful hurricane of 1915, the damage and loss of life were comparably minor.

"We're not leaders" some of you might say. "Then you have to become leaders," I respond, "because it has to be pretty obvious to you – as it is to me – that if you do not step into the breach, the same kinds of people will continue to lead, and we'll all wind up going to Hell in a hand basket." Run-of-the-mill politicians – and most are just that, or worse – cannot see past their next election. They do not get wound up enough about vital issues like disaster prevention because they do not understand nearly as well as you that disasters can be prevented; that understanding the preventives can be as much a motivator as a disaster, so you don't need to have hundreds of people die in order to get incensed.

So, do you need to run for political office? Well, that sure wouldn't hurt. But conducting vigils, marching in parades, taking part in attention-getting (but not destructive) acts of civil disobedience, and similar activities all could work, because they would get people talking and thinking, making genuinely responsible action politically acceptable.

“That’s not in our nature,” you might respond. Well, heck: I’m talking about the entire industry, not just those elements of it that are overly introspective and timid, or so apathetic as to say, “Let George do it.” (Ironically, the “George” in question was George Washington, the first civil engineer/design-build firm executive to become president of the United States.) I’m talking about the people who do and do not get *Foundation Drilling*, with the thought that some who do – maybe you – will say, “We really do need to do something, because, if we don’t, this will happen again and again, and we’ll all suffer”; i.e., community involvement is in your own best interests, because the community looks to you for guidance. So what if you’re not brave? When you know that you may be about to die, but you are in a unique position to do something significant to prevent that outcome, what would you do? Chances are it would be something more than snivel.

“Well, we would have done something, but we were afraid that our actions would be labeled ‘self-interest.’” So what? Are you that thin-skinned? And besides, who better to agitate for preventive action than those in the best position to know that it works, and specifically what has to be done to make it work? Would you make money at it? Of course. But so does the physician who performs the colonoscopy that will probably prevent a patient from contracting colorectal cancer, the second-most deadly cancer that is almost 100% preventable if only more people obtained colonoscopies.

“Most cities have many competing priorities. It’s tough to sort them out.” Politicians may say that, because they like to put money where the votes are. But as Katrina made 100% crystal-clear: Infrastructure is not an infrastructure issue; it’s a social issue, given that, first and foremost, you cannot have society – polite or otherwise –without people, and you won’t have people if they do not have houses, or if they have houses but the houses lack power and water. I’m not so naïve as to suggest that all public funds need to go into infrastructure, but how much vision does it take to realize that infrastructure needs to take a far larger piece of the pie if we are to serve future generations, and especially those elements of them that are most in need of public facilities and services? “We’d have to raise taxes to do that, either to accommodate pay-as-you go philosophies, or to pay the

interest on the tax-free bonds we'd have to float." Oh, gosh. Wouldn't that be awful? How much better it would be to keep taxes low so that... what? So people in the inner city lack the means to get to jobs and job training because public transportation is so bad? So we have to pay into public assistance programs to help the chronically unemployed survive?

As I see it, infrastructure issues are the most important of all social issues, and right now decisions about them are being made by people who have no real understanding of infrastructure. By obtaining leadership positions, or at least by getting the public's attention (which will generally lead to leadership positions), you and your fellow infrastructure industry participants can make America a much better place to live. I can think of hundreds of excuses why you cannot or should not do it, but that's what they all are: excuses. You are the only ones who can do it. If you don't, what you and so many others have just been through is only a pointless prelude. Until there's change – until you make change happen – it's all going to happen again and again. And that, my friends, would really be a disaster.