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Announcer ([00:02](#)):

You are listening to The Safety Moment Podcast by Utility Safety Partners. Safety is always a good conversation and it's a click away. Here's your host, Mike Sullivan.

Mike Sullivan ([00:16](#)):

Today we're talking politics, well sort of, we aren't getting political, but we are subject to government politics and the legislative and regulatory process. Those are just facts of life. Just like water is wet, scissors are sharp, and fire is hot. Joining me today is Mr. Ian La Couvee from Concentric Public Affairs, who has been assisting Utility Safety Partners on its most recent incarnation of our legislative journey. Welcome back to the podcast, Ian.

Ian La Couvee ([00:46](#)):

Thanks, Mike. It's great to see you again.

Mike Sullivan ([00:49](#)):

It's good to be seen. So how about that election we just had? What's your thoughts on that?

Ian La Couvee ([00:55](#)):

Well, not totally unexpected. There was some shuffling, some movement of numbers and a little bit went to the N D P side, but UCP remains in power and I think it has a pretty strong mandate from the Alberta public to govern going forward.

Mike Sullivan ([01:19](#)):

Do you recall a time in Canada, I mean Alberta, Canada, really anywhere for that matter, when politics was as hot a topic as it is now? I don't know if it's a question of my age or just time, but I don't recall politics being this important to be quite honest in Canada. Do you?

Ian La Couvee ([01:40](#)):

No, I don't, but I think it's part of a global phenomenon. What we're seeing now is a less stable platform of parties and in positions and ideologies. It's not the same old conservative, liberal, conservative, liberal ndp. It's opened the political race as open itself up to multiple voices, some of which are not helpful. But it's definitely a different era in politics, not just here in Canada, but worldwide.

Mike Sullivan ([02:19](#)):

It really opens things up to the far left and the far right, right.

Ian La Couvee ([02:22](#)):

That's right.

Mike Sullivan ([02:23](#)):

Yeah, and I agree with you. It really changes the whole dialogue because then now you're not focused anymore, whereas before you seem to be, you know, could focus on the issue. You could focus on the business of governance and politics, but now it just seems to be we're in a say anything to get elected position and then do anything to get elected. That's the first objective, get elected, and the second

objective is do everything possible to re-achieve the first objective. And because of that real governance to be disappearing and just my opinion, but that's what it feels like.

Ian La Couvee ([03:02](#)):

Yeah, well, more and more we're seeing that facts don't matter in our political discourse, but when once elections are over and the government is set, there's still room to bring some reasonable discourse to the table, and that's what we're going to do. Of course, Mike.

Mike Sullivan ([03:25](#)):

Well, exactly, and this is exactly what we're going to be talking about today is the legislative journey that we've been on for the past, oh, 18 months. Little more than that. Not quite two years, but about 18 months. But before we got there, I wanted to talk about exactly what has happened here in Alberta and now we know who we're going to the dance with the UCP is, remains the party to that we're working with. And really, I don't think it probably really mattered who was elected, which party was elected. This is the non-partisan issue and

Ian La Couvee ([03:58](#)):

Absolutely,

Mike Sullivan ([04:00](#)):

And the concern really was before we even get to this place, we took our foot off the gas during the election process and in probably what, 30 days even before the election, the campaign season began. We just didn't want to risk being some kind of political dodge ball. I guess even though it's nonpartisan, you just don't know what's going to happen.

Ian La Couvee ([04:24](#)):

Yeah, well we've had a few setbacks, as you say, Mike, we've been on the journey for 18 months or maybe two years now, trying to push this new legislation that you've been working on for so long, and we just landed in a bad period in Alberta politics. We went through Covid and then after Covid was less of an emergency, we ran into a politics in Alberta where leadership changed and there was a lot of infighting in all the parties, and it is been very hard to get our ask our request, our legislation before the legislators and before decision makers. So we've had to take a few pauses. We had a three track process going, and we keep getting shoved into sightings and waiting for things to happen on political landscape before we can reengage. But we haven't stopped engaging Mike. We've continued to engage in a very soft, gentle way until all the political cards landed, and now we know who our provincial, our provincial champions are, and it's time to go back to the table and ask them to pay some attention to what we want to do.

Mike Sullivan ([05:45](#)):

So with these changes mean, as you just said, we have this new political landscape where facts maybe don't necessarily matter, and then we had the leadership issues in Alberta. How has that changed the way Concentric is helping its clients like U S P manage their objectives?

Ian La Couvee ([06:07](#)):

Well, it's forced us to become a little more creative because the arguments that we had crafted and drafted and built and developed over years sometimes fall on deaf ears now. So with facts, as facts as a seemingly immaterial issue for governments and politicians, we have to get above that fray and just make the compelling argument that we've been making. And no matter which side you're on, you can't argue against public safety and economic livelihood and prosperity. So those are the arguments we're bringing, and I don't see that anybody on any side of the legislature could be opposed to what we're promoting.

Mike Sullivan ([07:04](#)):

I certainly hope not. I mean, like you said, we're, we are doing this for the betterment of Albertans full stop. And we are a province that has the most number of kilometers of buried utilities in Canada. And so many of those utilities are there to provide energy to Canadians across from coast to coast and into the US. Now, they are already regulated by provincial and federal legislation that requires locates and everything beforehand, but they are still within Alberta soil. And if the rest of the province doesn't have the same level of diligence in terms of damage prevention, I think everything can be at risk. So I'm important that we get this done. It's important that we get that message across. We've had this journey. It's been long enough we got to get there. The, the legislation history in Alberta, it's lengthy and outside of the Alberta Common Ground alliances 2019, I'll call it a high watermark, the outcomes to date haven't been favorable. But what do you think is different? This time we got close and we have these relationships and discussions and discourse with the government. What do you think is different this time?

Ian La Couvee ([08:25](#)):

Well, one of the things that's different, Mike as well, I'll start with U S P itself. The rebranding and the amalgamation and consolidation of Utility Safety Partners has changed the landscape a bit for us because we're one unified campaign coming together and it brings together a lot of forces and a lot of influences from our industry membership, from municipal office holders, from communities. So that started the change, Mike, in how we approach government. But number two is we've been fairly fortunate in the fact that the U C P has recently created a new division under the Minister of Transport, which is economic corridors. And we've had some positive and fruitful engagement with the parliamentary secretary for economic corridors. So that allows us now to make the case not just from a public safety perspective, but to make an economic argument. Now that U S P has both underground varied and above ground assets in its mandate, we can now make the argument that we're talking about some serious risk management on the economic side. We'll put aside for now the number one priority, which is public safety. But now we have a very, very good, strong case to make on the economic side.

Mike Sullivan ([10:06](#)):

When we began this latest incarnation of the legislation, the UCP was approaching three quarters of its mandate. It had about a year, a little bit more than a year left in its mandate. Now we're at the beginning of a brand new mandate. Does that put us in a more favourable position, do you think, to finally get this to the finish line and get it done?

Ian La Couvee ([10:29](#)):

Well, I think so. I'm definitely hopeful for, let's hope that we get a four year term and some stable government over the next four years. But I think it does put us in a better position in the sense that there's a new government, freshly elected, they're going to want to show you Albertans that they're

getting back to business. The side sideshow and the circus is over. Things are hopefully stabilized for a little while and they can get back to the business of good governance.

Mike Sullivan ([11:07](#)):

The level of engagement has been really quite good to date, but promoting safety is hard work for the politicians. It's really difficult to get them to appreciate the value of this legislative objective. That's the way I feel. It's not what they deal with every day. They're dealing with the business of government in general, but for the stakeholders that I deal with on a day-to-day basis, this is it. It's like, Mike, get it done, finally get it done. How do we keep it fresh and how do we keep it critical and top of mind for our direct contacts and we need that champion internally. How do we do that?

Ian La Couvee ([11:49](#)):

Well, as much as we hate to draft doomsday scenarios, we do have to bring it to the fore that this is a risk management, risk management exercise, and to really make people understand vividly what the risks are from a public safety perspective and from an economic perspective, you're managing infrastructure that's largely unseen and the overhead infrastructure that is seen, people really don't pay attention to it until something happens. So you and I have both been in the railway industry as well, and that we see trains rolling, but you never really figure out that the economic impact, that's those goods moving through, moving down a track or through a pipeline, the economic significance of that traffic, and not to mention the public safety risk that is involved in moving volatile resources or elec electric grids. Yeah, as I say, you know, don't know what you have until it's gone and people we're largely invisible to the general public. So we do, when we're out engaging and promoting and doing our advocacy work, we sometimes have to create these doomsday scenarios and let people know that just what could happen and how important it is for these buried and unburied assets to be registered. So not only can we prevent incidents, but if in the case of an incident, at least we know where the assets are and how to respond appropriately,

Mike Sullivan ([13:42](#)):

I want to remind everybody to always click before they dig. You can call, but clicking is so much easier. You can do it 24 7, 365, and nobody knows where you're digging better than you. And when you go online, you can identify precisely where you're digging on a map, and that information gets relayed to our members whose facilities intersect your digging project. It leaves nothing to chance. Click before you dig.

([14:15](#)):

And when we set out to draft damage prevention legislation about 18 months ago of the longer, maybe two key fundamentals of our plan was to meaningful and meaningfully engage stakeholders and also to be as transparent and pro as possible with the process. And we produced two consecutive versions of the draft legislation, the first draft. We asked for comments and we incorporated those comments. We responded to the comments that we didn't use, and we put that onto our website. Again, we promoted on social media. And then the third version is what we were going to present to the UCP government. Now there's another topic I want to talk about there of engagement, but when we look at that process, how important is that today? I mean, particularly in a world, in an environment, a reality where any person with a mobile device can engage?

Ian La Couvee ([15:09](#)):

Oh, right. I mean, it goes back to what you were talking about earlier, Mike, where facts don't matter because there are, there's so many voices out there that can now be heard and nobody has filters or the sensors to understand what's what may be fact and what may be just wild, crazy opinion. So you have to, as I mentioned before, you have to go above the fray and put all that aside and just get to the table and discuss things rationally with the stakeholders that we need to approach and need to engage. And that's why I mentioned before this campaign that we're on to promote the legislation is it's a three track process in parallel. On one track we have the direct engagement with the provincial government, but we have two other tracks going on. One is to, as a grassroots municipal engagement approach where we try to build support out in the communities for the legislation, remembering that these are voters and these are constituents.

[\(16:25\)](#):

And if we can get the grassroots support for the legislation along with membership support industry, heavy industry, light industry, whoever our members are, if we can get that influence to bear, we'll have a much easier process on that third track, which is direct provincial engagement. So our goal is to bring that influence to bear from the grassroots and from our membership to the provincial legislators so they can see that this is not just one organization asking for some policy change, but it's a whole province recognizing the importance of the legislation and showing to the legislators what the risks are if you don't adopt the legislation.

Mike Sullivan [\(17:21\)](#):

When we talk about the opinions, do squeaky wheels get the grease in legislation like this? I mean, we're not talking legislation that's going to be increasing taxes or something like that, or business tax or whatever the case may be. There are some stakeholders that are opposed to this legislation and some of those opposition members traditionally have had some very deep pockets. They still, does that mean that they get the veto power, the unwritten veto, or can we overcome that with public opinion?

Ian La Couvee [\(18:00\)](#):

Oh, I absolutely believe we can overcome it. There are the squeaky wheels out there. We do get some attention, but we're bringing in a brand new set of shiny wheels, and hopefully that'll get the attention to come our way. I think reason will prevail in the end, and those who are opposed to legislation and what we're trying to do, Mike can easily be shut down in a reasonable debate

Mike Sullivan [\(18:31\)](#):

About a year ago. And we had the second draft of the legislation posted and our 30 day year, longer comment period had completed, and I received correspondence from the Alberta Road Builders and Heavy Construction Association now that road builders are one of our heaviest users, and thankfully that they do use our system, they do secure and request locates, and they reached out to utility safety partners and they said, we would like to engage with a bilateral working group here to with U S P critical members and members of the road builders to review the legislation almost line by line and just go through it, give it to once over from their perspective. And as a heavy user, we were more than happy to do that, and we've gone through that process and it's actually flourished the relationship even broader than that. Again, very thankful to the road builders and their ceo, Ron Glenn, for initiating that correspondence in this relationship.

Ian La Couvee [\(19:42\)](#):

And what a great ally to have.

Mike Sullivan ([19:43](#)):

Oh, exactly mean that is a critical ally. It's exactly where I was going. But what other allies do we need? I mean, the road builders, absolutely, it's a critical ally, but what other allies do we need?

Ian La Couvee ([19:57](#)):

Well, I mean, our allyship begins with the membership. We have some pretty powerful and influential members, but also, as I was talking earlier about the grassroots, there are two municipal associations in Alberta and they carry a lot of weight, and we've been engaging them fairly consistently, and we can get the two associations that represent all of the municipalities in Alberta. We're talking about all of the voters and constituents, and hopefully they'll feel compelled to respond and to engage with us on that basis.

Mike Sullivan ([20:37](#)):

What's the next step with the municipalities in Alberta for us?

Ian La Couvee ([20:41](#)):

Yeah. Well, those three tracks that have been backed up for quite a while now, where they're got the green light to go now. So our objective is to get out there to reengage with the grassroots, to go after the municipalities that haven't signed up to USP and register their assets to go after them. And then to go after some of the members of U S P who have a very big voice in the legislature in Edmonton. We have to recruit them and mobilize them as our allies. And so it's not just Mike Sullivan speaking to the government, but it's the Trans Canadas the hemorrhages of the world that are speaking directly to government.

Mike Sullivan ([21:35](#)):

And when we talk about municipalities, the majority of municipalities, the rms and the MDs, and in Alberta, they are registered. And now it's not a vast majority, it's a slight majority, but it's still a majority. The glass is half full. But I know there's a reluctance among a number of municipalities to register their assets because quite simply, they don't know the precise location of those assets. And the legislation, I want to make a point of this for those who are listening, the draft legislation is promoting a five year grace period for all municipalities to register with utility safety partners, register the location of their burrito and overhead assets with U S P, and that will allow them over a five year period to identify the location of those assets and register them by Polygon or shape file, which will dramatically reduce the cost of triage and locating.

([22:37](#)):

Because if you can imagine a municipality that is notified of an excavation within the boundaries of the municipality, that's going to be over notified and over notification ends up costing a municipality money. And the challenge is, well, what if we get hit? What if something gets hit? We have to be a member, but we can help you, those municipalities along with that by identifying the location of those assets and registering them by polygon, reducing their costs. And what we've been able to do over the last four or five, six years is reduce the number of notifications that go out to our members by roughly 25 to 35%. And what that means is it doesn't mean we're getting less locate requests, we're actually getting more

locate requests than ever. But because our members are registering their assets by Polygon, they are reducing the number of notifications, therefore reducing their costs.

(23:32):

So this is something that we want to be able to help our municipalities along and get there. And this is one of the key messages we need to get out to our municipalities. Let's shift things a little bit to the last part of engagement, and that's the microsite that Concentric Public Affairs developed for us. Now, let's talk about that a little bit. It's kind of cool how it works. A person can go onto the microsite, their mobile device on their laptop, their tablet, whatever they want to do, and well, I'll ask you, how does that work? It's kind of cool how it works.

Ian La Couvee (24:07):

Oh, yeah. It's a very simple and user-friendly interface, which we've been using fairly successfully for the last year, Mike. Basically, you go in, as you say, from a mobile or from your laptop, click the link, get into our microsite, and on the microsite you'll see updates on where our legislative campaign is at. You'll see how the draft legislation has evolved. And the microsite also gives you opportunity to feedback. So you can write comments, you can send us criticism, you can send us compliments, but you can speak also very specifically to the draft legislation if you see issues that are of concern to you, of course at this point. Now, Mike, we've closed the drafts for comment,

Mike Sullivan (25:04):

But the next step really is Joe Alberta or Joe or Jane Alberta, they can go to the microsite. They can essentially sign a letter to their MLA saying, I support this legislation. And it gets directed directly to their MLA. Correct?

Ian La Couvee (25:22):

Correct. That's Mike. That's the next step for us, Mike, is to get that letter of support campaign going, updating the microsite to make it as easy as possible for a stakeholder to send their letter of support to their MLA. And that's basically what we'll be focused on in the next few weeks.

Mike Sullivan (25:45):

Looking forward to that. That's going to be, I know when we did this with the Canadian Common Ground Alliance, I had, I had a couple of MPs who knew me contacting me directly and say, okay, enough, we get it. They had over seven or 800 letters from constituents arriving in their inbox saying, Hey, I support this, this bill. That's 2:29 at the time. And that's the kind of impact I want to be able to see with our MLA's here in Alberta. And regardless of political stripe, I don't care. And if your MLA represents you and this is important to you, then I want to do you to be able to do that and send your MLA a message saying, I support this. So you need to support it.

Ian La Couvee (26:29):

Yeah. There's nothing wrong with overwhelming them with our support because it's an overwhelming issue and it should be very large chorus of voices working in our favor.

Mike Sullivan (26:42):

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And the MLA's themselves, I mean, let's face it, they have a very broad array of topics that they have to be knowledgeable about at any given moment. And if this makes their job a little bit easier, then why not? Let's do it.

Ian La Couvee ([26:58](#)):

And it sounds like you're going to be on the road quite a bit this year, Mike?

Mike Sullivan ([27:02](#)):

I think so. Yeah. I'm ready to do that. I have new tires on the vehicle, good breaks and all that, so I'm ready to go and we're ready to go. But that'll be the roadshow happening soon. And hopefully not in bad weather. The weather right now is conducive to that, so I'm ready anytime we are. That's

Ian La Couvee ([27:18](#)):

Great. Well, I look forward to seeing you on the road.

Mike Sullivan ([27:21](#)):

Well, Ian, thanks for being on the podcast today. I really appreciate it. If you're waiting for this legislation to drop, it's, we have a little bit more work to do. We have a little bit more of education and awareness and promotion to our MLA's to do and to the municipalities, but we are getting close. And one of those key things we need to do as well is for utility safety partners and concentric to engage in a meeting with the road builders and one of our key allies going through this. So we want to be completely, again, transparent and engaging meaningfully. So throughout the rest of this process,

Ian La Couvee ([28:02](#)):

Yeah, we'll be coming out a little bit stronger.

Mike Sullivan ([28:04](#)):

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