

**Announcer (00:00:02):**

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

**Mike Sullivan (00:00:15):**

Welcome to the Safety Moment, the podcast you have been waiting for. My guest today is Mr. Jemmie Wang. Jemmie has been a mainstay in the damage prevention industry for close to 25 years, and we will be talking about a variety of things related to damage prevention. So tune in, settle in, and have a listen.

Jemmie, finally we get to do this after all the technical issues. I had a couple myself. Good to see you. How are you?

**Jemmie Wang (00:00:44):**

Amazing. Thank you, Mike. Great to see you as well.

**Mike Sullivan (00:00:47):**

We have been talking about doing this for a while and we are finally getting around to it. So Jemmie, before we get into anything, I know you and a lot of folks know you, but there are many who may not. Please introduce yourself. How did you get into this industry?

**Jemmie Wang (00:01:04):**

Yes, thank you. Very happy to be here talking with you, Mike, about damage prevention. How do we advance it for safety and other stakeholder needs? I am a consultant, advisor, and investor in this industry. I came into it 23 years ago through a contract locating company. We grew that company and sold it three times. Then I moved into private locating and now I work with many technology companies. I have done everything from finance to operational efficiency and have been part of seven successful company exits in this industry. I want to give something back and I love what you have done in Alberta. I love the progressive and forward-thinking work that has been happening there.

**Mike Sullivan (00:02:05):**

Well, thank you. I have a great team that works with me. They indulge me. They tell me when I am out to lunch, and sometimes they say, you are out to lunch but maybe we can make that work. That has been the success story here. A very forgiving team, thank goodness.

But it is very kind of you. We have been fortunate to build what we have and we have been able to look at the problem from a different perspective. We have been given that latitude, and maybe that is what we all need to do. Take a step back and look at things from a new angle.

So 23 years in the industry. You are Canadian and a dual citizen. You are a US citizen as well. You were born in Ontario, right?

**Jemmie Wang (00:02:53):**

I was born in Taiwan, but I grew up in Toronto, Ontario.

**Mike Sullivan (00:02:57):**

So you are a fellow Canadian. You understand the ways of the great white north. We are all a

little bit different up here. I think the cold affects our brains and we do things differently. Speaking of which, it is bloody cold here today. I do not know where you are exactly, but it is cold here. We finally got winter last week, so the digging season came to an abrupt end in Alberta a couple of days ago.

You have seen a lot. You are a mainstay at the damage prevention conferences I attend in the United States. During COVID I slowed my travel like most of us, but I have been back at a few and you are always there. You represent the industry broadly, not just a small slice of it.

What are some of the things you have seen in, say, the last decade? I would argue there has been more change in the past 10 years than in the previous 20. What trends make you think we are on the right track? And similarly, what should we stop doing?

**Jemmie Wang (00:04:10):**

Great question. I will try to give a short answer.

If we stick to the last 10 years, some of the positive developments include:

Better, more accurate, less expensive GPS technology. RTK units getting physically smaller. Much more data is being collected and used, which results in fewer unnecessary notifications. Advanced AI risk assessment. Years ago it was much less sophisticated. Now it is far more capable.

Selective and intelligent ticket screening, removing known low-risk transmissions.

Ticket management systems.

Real AI mapping of the underground, not just simple if then statements.

Systems that measure, quantify, and improve locator training and performance.

And we are seeing more technology that makes locating easier to learn and use by reducing human subjectivity wherever possible.

I believe the best technology and AI does not replace people. It complements the skilled professionals we already have.

**Mike Sullivan (00:06:01):**

And that is exactly the point. People jump straight to the fear of being replaced by AI. Maybe one day, but certainly not soon. AI will complement what we do. It will not replace what we do.

**Jemmie Wang (00:06:17):**

I saw a saying that I think is true. People worry about being replaced by AI, but you are not going to be replaced by AI. You are going to be replaced by someone who uses AI. If you are not using AI, you will be replaced by someone who is. So you probably will not be replaced by AI itself, but by a person working in conjunction with AI.

**Mike Sullivan (00:06:48):**

So we have moved ahead in some areas, but where are we stuck? I see things and I think, why are we still doing that? You must see it too. What is your perspective?

**Jemmie Wang (00:07:03):**

Totally. I can hear the exasperation in your voice.

**Mike Sullivan (00:07:09):**

Is it that obvious?

**Jemmie Wang (00:07:11):**

I very much share that feeling. I think where we are stuck is literally doing more of the same. There is a lot of the mentality that if we can just educate people more, if we can just locate more, locate harder, locate bigger areas, if we can just throw more humans at the problem, we will solve it. Because that is what we know and what we do. So we end up doing more of the same.

There is also a strong aversion to new technologies and methods in this industry. Historically, studies over the last 50 years or so have shown that about 80 percent of productivity improvements in business and industry have come from technological advancements. Most of the remaining 20 percent comes from improvements in processes and in organizations.

I see a lot of aversion to technology in this space. People will say they use technology. They use smartphones and basic tools. However, I do not see enough people using deep technology.

There is very little emphasis on efficiency. Many people view this industry as primarily a safety industry, which is true. However, too many people think safety and efficiency are opposing values, or at least unrelated. They are not.

An industry that is inefficient and wasteful is not sustainable. There are for profit companies involved. We all need to make a living. At some point those companies will notice waste and quietly opt out, because it does not work for them. We are seeing that now.

I also think there is still a misalignment of interests in the 811 system, where the customers of the system and the recipients of its outputs are not the same. Those are some of the factors that are not working and that are holding us back.

**Mike Sullivan (00:09:52):**

Who really is the client, right? I agree. Is it the utility owners, who put up the funding to establish the notification centre? Or is the client the end user, the person who uses the service and wants the result? They want to know where the buried utilities are so they can avoid them. I see that as part of the problem.

When you bring technology into the discussion, some people are risk averse. That is part of it too. And not to put too fine a point on it, but people who look like me, with grey hair, who are getting a little long in the tooth. Is that part of the problem?

**Jemmie Wang (00:10:34):**

So you need to be put out to pasture. Is that it, Mike?

**Mike Sullivan (00:10:37):**

Well, maybe people who look like me. Maybe not me exactly, but people who look like me.

**Jemmie Wang (00:10:46):**

I think it is several factors. One is that there are many very tenured people in this space. That is simply reality.

I remember in business school when we talked about consumer products and companies such

as Procter and Gamble. Their ideal customer was about 25 to 40 years old. I believe it was even narrower, about 25 to 35. People over 40 tend not to change their ways.

**Mike Sullivan (00:11:22):**

It is very hard. Very hard.

**Jemmie Wang (00:11:24):**

For example, I use Colgate toothpaste. I do not care how much Crest advertises to me. I am just not going to change.

The second reality, and not to be morbid, is that those much older than 40 do not have as many years left to buy toothpaste.

**Mike Sullivan (00:11:39):**

Right.

**Jemmie Wang (00:11:42):**

So it is a fact of life and of business. Older stakeholders are less likely to change, and I think that is part of it.

The second factor, and this is a compliment to the industry in some ways, is that from the perspective of many decision makers, not the people with damage prevention or safety in their job titles but the senior executives, what is happening now is safe enough.

We do not have buildings blowing up every day. In the United States, over the last 15 years, the number of people who die annually because of poor damage prevention is fewer than 10, and typically fewer than five, in a construction industry where about 10,000 people die each year. So for many decision makers, it is safe enough.

Their thinking is, why rock the boat? Why introduce new variables when the current situation is acceptable? It is a bit of "better the devil you know than the devil you do not know."

**Mike Sullivan (00:12:53):**

That is the ultimate measure. Fatalities and injuries. Those are critical. But the real issue, and I am not downplaying deaths and injuries, is the societal cost. The cost of damage. The cost of repair. The broader social costs are very real and everyone pays for them.

When you start to calculate those costs, you see how significant they are. You probably saw my LinkedIn post a couple of months ago. I was in Dallas travelling home and I was stuck at the airport because fibre optics had been damaged. ChatGPT told me the societal cost of that damage was about 80 million dollars. That is an enormous cost.

I was thinking about that not long ago, during a conversation, I think when we were in Halifax for the CCG event. I remembered a woman in the line behind me at the airline counter. She was in tears with her young daughter. She was on the phone with someone at a hospital. It was clear her mother was not going to make it. Someone was holding a phone to her mother's ear. She knew she was not going to get there in time. She was saying her goodbyes.

You cannot calculate that cost. So fatalities and injuries are one part of it. For every damage, there is a societal cost.

**Mike Sullivan (00:14:33):**

Those costs are enormous. Going back to what we were saying earlier, change is difficult. You have to want to change. You have to understand the need to change and that change is healthy.

If you stay where you are, you become Blockbuster or Kodak. Both companies had the capital to change, but they held on and said, we have the tiger by the tail and we are not changing. Our industry is no different. If we keep doing the same thing over and over, we will not get different results.

When I was in Dallas, I gave a presentation, and I think you were in the room. I was speaking about the Alternate Locate Provider, which leads into another topic. Legislation, yes or no. That is a tough question. Do we pursue legislation or not?

During that presentation, the statistics were staggering. Compared to the status quo, the results were not even in the same ballpark, not even on the same planet. The data were remarkable.

Afterwards, someone from a US notification centre, a senior leader, said to me, "We could not do that here." I asked why. He said, "Our legislation would not allow it."

I said, is that not interesting? You have damage prevention legislation that will not allow you to implement something that, statistically and based on data, we know will reduce damages. That is the crux of the problem. Legislation, yes or no.

For years I have hung my hat on legislation and I still think it has a role. There is a place for legislation and regulation. However, the language has to be at a level that does not trap you in time. It must allow you to move with technology and practice. It cannot be overly granular.

**Jemmie Wang (00:16:31):**

Here is what I think. Legislation, yes or no. I believe we would get better results if we had either significantly more legislation, with more enforcement, or significantly less.

If we had more legislation and stronger enforcement, we might finally factor many of those societal costs you mentioned into the cost of damages, late locates, and no locates. At present, most people see a damage as paying a thousand dollars to repair it and then moving on. The broader social costs are not factored in. If those costs were built into the system, it would be more painful but also more accurate.

On the other hand, with far less legislation, what I call the Mad Max scenario, there would be almost no legislation. You would not even have to be a member of 811. People assume that would mean buildings blowing up, but I am not sure that would be the outcome.

In that scenario, the facility owner would be told, you should locate, but you are not required to. If someone cuts your line, you can go after them, but that is a lot of work. They can shut down an LLC and start another one inexpensively. So you have an incentive to market and manage your risk differently.

The contractor would not have to wait for you. If you are late, they could dig and roll the dice, or they could pay for their own locate. You would have Alternate Locate Providers everywhere. There would be other models.

I am not advocating for the Mad Max scenario, but as a thought experiment, it is helpful. It makes you ask whether that scenario would really be catastrophic or whether some aspects might actually be an improvement.

Right now, the system is very rigid. You have to follow a process that is largely unchanged from

50 years ago. If the facility owner does not show up, you still have to wait. You have no real recourse. You are told, you just have to wait.

Maybe that was acceptable in the 1970s when there were three channels on television and everyone used cash.

**Mike Sullivan (00:19:07):**

Exactly.

**Jemmie Wang (00:19:07):**

Now I can order something from Amazon and it is here in a couple of hours. There are almost infinite options. The world has changed and the system has not.

People blame legislation, and sometimes that is fair. Legislation becomes a crutch. It is a crutch for contractors and for facility owners.

If you think about the Mad Max thought experiment, it helps reveal barriers. It shows you where the rules themselves are the problem.

**Mike Sullivan (00:19:59):**

Or maybe the legislation has simply become too heavy. Maybe we need just enough legislation, but not too much.

What I mean is that the language might be so prescriptive that you do not know whether to do one thing or the other. I think that may be where we are now. Maybe we have not found the right blend.

**Jemmie Wang (00:20:25):**

I agree. The word I often use is rigid. Overly prescriptive regulation makes the system rigid. It calcifies it. A lot of stakeholders use it as a shield. They say, I am following the words of the regulation, even if I am not aligned with the spirit of it. What more do you want me to do?

**Mike Sullivan (00:20:46):**

Yes.

**Jemmie Wang (00:20:47):**

They say, I am doing what I am required to do. Here is my golden shield, my get out of jail free card. I am done.

**Mike Sullivan (00:20:56):**

In that state that told me they could not implement an Alternate Locate Provider model because the legislation does not allow it, that tells me the legislation is archaic. It is not keeping pace, which is common. Legislation is often out of date the day after it is enacted.

If the legislation used a different kind of language, it could be more goal oriented. Goal oriented legislation has its own challenges, but if the goal is no damage, then the utility owner should be permitted to use whatever method best achieves that. Then you build a better mouse trap around that principle.

**Jemmie Wang (00:21:46):**

I think that is a good starting point. However, when you say "if the goal is no damage," I would

ask whether that truly is the goal for all stakeholders.

For some stakeholders, the real goal might be the lowest total cost for themselves, not the lowest total number of damages for the system as a whole.

In some cases, the lowest total number of damages may not equal the lowest cost for a particular stakeholder. I will give you an example.

I was speaking with a state regulator, a very sharp regulator. I said, there are a lot of unnecessary tickets, refresh tickets, tickets that are never used. Someone calls in 20 tickets when they only need 10 or five. If we just charged a nominal fee, say two dollars per ticket, like some ticket management systems do, we could remove a lot of this waste.

Free resources are overused. That is a basic principle in economics. If we charged even one or two dollars per 811 ticket, we would see fewer unnecessary tickets and less noise in the system.

He said, "I can tell you who will never accept that." I expected him to say the contractors. Instead he said, "The facility owners will never accept that."

I asked why. He said, "If the system charges the contractors even one dollar, the contractors now have recourse. Legally, they can go after the facility owners for late tickets and downtime. Right now, they have almost no standing. If they are paying per ticket, they suddenly do."

That could end up costing facility owners significantly more than the damages themselves.

I recently heard the same thing from a representative of a large contractor organization. He told me, "Our members would be fine with that, but the facility owners will never support it."

This is what I mean by misalignment of interests. People say they want to reduce damages. They do, but only to a point and often only if it does not increase their own costs. The people who attend conferences with "safety" or "damage prevention" in their titles truly care. But their organizations are run by finance and by profit and loss statements.

They may know that 40 percent of tickets in some states are refreshes or unnecessary. That is a huge amount of noise and cost. Yet they might still oppose measures that reduce that noise if the measures also increase their own financial exposure.

**Mike Sullivan (00:25:27):**

And whether that happens depends on the language in the legislation.

**Jemmie Wang (00:25:29):**

Yes. It depends on the language, but once the contractor is paying, they have more skin in the game and more recourse. Right now it is a free service for them.

**Mike Sullivan (00:26:01):**

Back to the Mad Max scenario. You can see where I am going. Suddenly it does not sound so bad. If the goal is reducing damages, and if you reduce damages you reduce injuries, fatalities, and social costs, then that is the root.

If legislation is not in the way, and we are not trapped by regulatory language, then we can adopt whatever methods best reduce damages and minimize costs.

For years I have pushed for legislation and still believe there is a place for it. But the language must not capture you in time. It must allow you to move with technology and practice. It must not be too granular.

**Jemmie Wang (00:27:25):**

I agree. Legislation must not make the system more rigid. It has to allow and even encourage technology development and implementation, along with improved methods. Otherwise, there is no point.

If legislation is too rigid, people will game the system. All stakeholders do this to some extent. They comply with the letter of the law and regulations in ways that maximize outcomes for themselves.

**Mike Sullivan (00:28:13):**

This has been your 2025 bonus track on the Safety Moment Podcast. Thank you for tuning in this year. We sincerely appreciate it.

We will be back with more Safety Moment episodes in early 2026. Until then, hi everybody. Have a great holiday season. When you come back, we will have lots more for you to learn and listen to. We hope to see you at our annual general meeting on April 22 in Red Deer.

Let us talk about best practices for a bit. In Alberta and across Canada, the story and narrative for us was that we tried to get three digit dialling. We tried to get 811 and it did not work. "Click before you dig" was the consolation prize.

Shortly after, we realised that it is actually better. At first, it frees up the people on the phones because people can request locates online 24 hours a day. Then, a few years ago, we wondered whether damages are actually reduced when we have online locate requests. We found out that yes, they are.

Other provinces confirmed those findings. Colleagues across the United States privately told me the same thing. Publicly, only one or two would say it. Others said, we know it reduces damages, but we are not going to say that publicly.

It is clearly a best practice in terms of damage reduction. As I said earlier, if you reduce damages, everything else cascades from there. Why do you think there is reluctance in the United States to adopt the phrase "click before you dig"?

**Jemmie Wang (00:30:10):**

Great question. Some centres are more aggressive about transitioning to online tickets, and my hat is off to them.

Other states take the view that it is what it is. They recommend the website, but if people want to call in, they accept that. Even though phone calls increase the chances of miscommunication between the caller and the customer service representative, they are still comfortable with it.

There is a mindset of, what do you want me to do? I run a call centre. I do what the community wants. There is a lot of that.

People say, I run a call centre and I do what the stakeholders want.

**Mike Sullivan (00:31:04):**

But it goes beyond that. "Call before you dig" was the trademark call to action for decades. I remember my father in the 1970s. He worked for Bell in Montreal as an engineer. He travelled to the United States and had briefcases and material branded with "Call before you dig." I remember seeing that as a kid. I never thought I would end up in this industry, but here we are.

That phrase has been around a long time. Then 811 came in and did a great job. It was like the



Montreal Canadiens logo on the front of the jersey for the entire damage prevention industry. We made no secret of the fact that we wanted it in Canada. It did not work here, but we moved on and found something that works better.

“Click before you dig” has proven more effective. Yet in the United States there is reluctance to supplant 811. It feels like people are saying, that is fine for you up north, but we are not doing that down here, even though we know it reduces damages.

**Jemmie Wang (00:32:15):**

Yes. I go back to what I said earlier. The call centres are accountable to their boards, which are largely composed of facility owners. Those senior decision makers are not seeing buildings blowing up every day. So they ask, what is the problem?

If there is no obvious crisis, they do not feel pressure to change.

**Mike Sullivan (00:32:48):**

It is not broken.

**Jemmie Wang (00:32:49):**

Exactly. Their view is, if it is not broken, do not fix it. There are also risks in changing. They could lose some control. There might be more damages in the short term because they are moving into unfamiliar territory. It could even cost them more.

For example, with the idea of charging per ticket, as we discussed. That could lower damages but raise other costs. So the thinking becomes, let sleeping dogs lie.

The people who run the centres may personally want change, but when the board asks, why are you pushing web ticket entry, they have to respond to that. If their bosses do not see a crisis, they ask whether there are bigger priorities.

I spoke with an executive who made a great observation. Many years ago, board members from utilities tended to be directors or vice presidents. Now, in the United States, many board representatives are at the manager level, often in field damage prevention. They are not there to be strategic. They are there to keep the wheels on the bus.

**Mike Sullivan (00:34:40):**

That is what we are seeing here in Canada as well. It used to be vice presidents and directors. Now that level of representation is much less common. I think we are in a transition period.

Our board at Utility Safety Partners has recognised that we need to look internally and educate ourselves about proper governance and the line between governance and operations. I take my hat off to them. They have done that work.

I would say our board now is better equipped and better educated than any version of this board in the last decade. That is a good thing.

Talking to peers across North America, it is the same story everywhere. There has been a lot of attrition and change. There are fewer vice presidents and directors. Engagement has been pushed down to lower levels.

When you consider slogans like “click before you dig,” “call before you dig,” and “50 in 5,” I think we may also be hurting ourselves. In Halifax, at the Canadian Common Ground Alliance Symposium, Sarah Magruder Lyle gave the keynote. She spoke about 50 in 5, which I believe is now in its third year.

We are very good at slogans in this industry. We are excellent at them. Slogans can be important. They help capture and recapture attention. But we have so many: dig safe, call before you dig, click before you dig, 50 in 5. We might be saturating people. We cannot land on a single core message, and I think that is hurting us. What do you think?

**Jemmie Wang (00:37:20):**

When 50 in 5 was announced, I did not say this publicly, but I did not think we would hit that goal. However, I liked the idea for one reason, and I applaud Sarah and the CGA and its board for putting it out there.

It reminded me of President Kennedy's speech in 1962 about going to the moon before the end of the decade. It was an extraordinarily ambitious goal. It was very costly financially. At one point, almost five percent of United States GDP went to NASA.

Kennedy said, we choose to go to the moon not because it is easy, but because it is hard. It would help measure and focus the country's efforts.

That is what I like about 50 in 5. It is ambitious. However, unlike the moon program, we have not committed enough resources. We have not allowed ourselves to take enough risks.

When I say risks, I do not mean safety risks. I mean risks in technology, new methods, and new processes. We have not done that. The industry is still rigid. Even many of the things we talk about under 50 in 5 focus on technology alone, without revisiting the underlying process.

The 811 process in the United States is largely the same as it was 50 years ago.

**Mike Sullivan (00:39:10):**

When we realised that online locate requests reduce damages, we saw about 50 percent fewer damages in our tests. That was an obvious example of something we should do. It was measurable. Yet it still has not been broadly discussed or implemented.

The Alternate Locate Provider is another example. Damages in those programs are down dramatically, perhaps by 90 percent. It is incredible.

If you want to get to 50 in 5, those are clear opportunities. But again, legislation and willingness to change become barriers.

The Chief Operating Officer at the National Energy Board, where I once worked as an inspector, loved his light bulb jokes. He used to say, how many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? The answer was, only one, but the light bulb has to want to change.

I think that applies here. We have to want to change in order to change. At the moment, we are very good at slogans, but not as good at implementation.

**Jemmie Wang (00:40:45):**

I agree. I have raised this question before, and I think it gets to the core of why change is so hard. If we ask, who is the customer of the 811 system, what is the answer?

When I ask that in round tables and informal discussions, the most common response is that the customer is the caller, the contractor.

Then I ask, what is the definition of a customer? It is a person or entity that pays for a product or service. By that definition, the customers of the system are the facility owners.

If I then ask, who is the recipient of the outputs of the system, people say the contractors and callers.

That gap, where the customer is different from the recipient of the service, is at the heart of many challenges in this industry. I would say over 90 percent of the big problems and opportunities relate to that misalignment.

The entity that pays for the service in the United States is not the entity that receives the output, at least not most of the time. A facility owner might call in only 10 percent of the tickets. The remaining 90 percent are for other contractors.

So from their perspective, 90 percent of the time they are paying for a service that primarily benefits someone else. That shapes behaviour. They are more likely to say, I do this because I have to, not because I get value from every ticket.

That is a huge challenge.

The Alternate Locate Provider program is interesting because the customer and the recipient of the output are the same. They are the excavator. The interests are aligned. The excavator hires or performs the locate and uses the resulting information. There is direct accountability between those two roles.

**Mike Sullivan (00:43:21):**

Talking about the Alternate Locate Provider program, there are a few other things I want to cover before we come back to that.

You have a great perspective on both the United States and Canada. I see it as well when I attend events in the United States. I am always amazed when I visit a one call centre in person. The offices are large and impressive. You can see there is a lot of money in the space.

Here in Canada, we are very different. At Utility Safety Partners, we no longer have a physical office. We are completely remote. We have been fully remote since March 15, 2020. Initially we thought it would be two weeks to flatten the curve. We never went back.

Today I went to our old office to pick up some mail that still gets delivered there. Our lease ends at the end of the year and the organisation we sublet to is taking it over.

The same pattern is happening across Canada. In British Columbia, BC One Call is fully remote. Saskatchewan and Manitoba are remote and we operate their services. Ontario has an office. Quebec has an office. I do not think they are there very often. Atlantic Canada is run out of Quebec.

Bricks and mortar are becoming a thing of the past in Canada. It is fading. You must see the difference between Canada and the United States. Is there a better mouse trap here?

**Jemmie Wang (00:46:09):**

That is a great question and a sharp observation. The answer may go beyond our time today, but I will say this.

I had a discussion with a large Canadian utility that is doing amazing things. They are improving damage outcomes while reducing how often a locator has to visit the field, through mapping and sharing of maps and other initiatives.

I told them, that sort of program would be extremely difficult to implement in the United States. They asked why.

I said there are too many entities making too much money under the current model. This is not a conspiracy theory. It is just incentives.

There is a saying that you cannot help a person understand something if their salary depends on them not understanding it. That applies here.

In the United States, 811 centres are funded per transmission. If they reduce the number of transmissions, they reduce their revenue. Someone will say, but they are non profits. That is true, but they still have budgets.

The top person at an 811 centre with three million dollars in revenue makes considerably less than the top person at a centre with ten million dollars in revenue.

If you look at all the stakeholders, you can see that pattern. This is why some stakeholders are reluctant to support changes that reduce volume or change the model.

Someone might ask why Canadian organisations still do these things even when it might appear to go against short term financial interests.

This goes a little beyond our scope, but I think in Canada there is a stronger sense of community and societal good. There is more of a feeling that we are all in this together.

In the United States, the phrase “rugged individualism” is widely used and considered positive. In other countries, people may not even know what it means.

The end result is that, in the United States, you might hear, “Yes, this would reduce damages, but it will hurt me financially, so I will not support it.” Sometimes it is that simple.

**Mike Sullivan (00:48:54):**

I would never have seen it that way, and I find it a bit troubling if that is the case. But that might be another whole episode by itself.

**Jemmie Wang (00:49:10):**

It probably is another episode.

**Mike Sullivan (00:49:11):**

Let us talk about conferences. Post COVID, there seems to be a growing number of damage prevention conferences. Everywhere you look there is another one.

The CGA and Infrastructure Resources split, so now instead of one conference, there are two. In Canada, we are not immune to this. Utility Safety Partners never held a conference until recently, when we unified with the Common Ground Alliance here in Alberta.

In Ontario, Ontario One Call has a conference. The regional Common Ground Alliance has a conference. The Canadian Common Ground Alliance has a conference. All are damage prevention related.

Is there too much choice now? Are we being diluted?

**Jemmie Wang (00:49:59):**

I am a big proponent of the marketplace of ideas and of the ancient Greek concept of the agora, a public space where people meet to discuss and debate. I like conferences in principle.

I do not think there are too many conferences. I think there are too many conferences where people meet and then leave with the same conclusion they always have. They say, we just need to communicate more and work together more.

I hear that at the end of many conferences. It feels like a vague slogan. We have been saying it for 30 years and it does not move the needle.

There is not enough real clash of ideas. There is not enough “iron sharpens iron.” We do not see enough uncomfortable but productive conversation about the rules of the game.

**Mike Sullivan (00:51:16):**

From my perspective, there is a clash of ideas, but it is unbalanced. When an elephant moves near a sleeping mouse, the mouse feels it. The reverse is not true. That is sometimes how it feels at these conferences.

**Jemmie Wang (00:51:36):**

Even in committee meetings and breakout sessions, I often see people suggesting more “duct tape” solutions. Someone says, why do you not do this, or why do you not do that.

I am often the one saying, that stakeholder does not do this because they are not required to, and it would hurt their profitability. People are playing by the rules of the game.

One of my themes is that the challenge is not only the players, it is the rules of the game. People have built profitable and stable businesses based on those rules.

If you want real improvement, you have to change the rules. Otherwise people might say they will try something new, but they will not follow through if it hurts their margins.

Then at the end of the conference, the conclusion is again that we need to communicate more and work together more.

**Mike Sullivan (00:52:51):**

And sing Kumbaya.

**Jemmie Wang (00:52:53):**

Yes, and sing Kumbaya, because they do not want to do anything that truly threatens the profitability of their business.

**Mike Sullivan (00:53:02):**

That brings us back to the fear of people losing their jobs and the threat to livelihoods. Let us talk about artificial intelligence again.

AI is the buzzword of the last few years in this industry. Is it a game changer, or just another trend?

**Jemmie Wang (00:53:21):**

It is absolutely a game changer. We are going to see more and more companies using deep AI that will change the industry.

Most of those companies will be outsiders, new entrants that disrupt the existing model. The reason is simple. Existing stakeholders do not want to disrupt their profitable businesses. I do not blame them.

This is why industry after industry is disrupted by new entrants. They do not have legacy revenue streams to protect.

**Mike Sullivan (00:54:05):**

The Blockbuster and Netflix story.

**Jemmie Wang (00:54:08):**

Exactly. Or Kodak. Kodak invented the digital camera but chose not to disrupt its own profitable film and chemical business.

The same pattern exists here. Many companies will hold on to their current models until it is too late or until they are forced to acquire disruptive newcomers.

Personally, I work with several technology companies in this space. I think we will see incumbents hold on as long as they can, and then either fail or pivot by acquiring those new entrants.

**Mike Sullivan (00:55:25):**

Back to the mouse trap analogy. I am a believer in “the early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.” You need to know where that tipping point is.

If you hold out too long and do not know when to move, you might not survive.

At Utility Safety Partners, we are looking at AI. We are exploring what it can do for us. We are not looking at it to replace people. Not yet, and I do not see that happening during my tenure.

We see AI as a complement. It is a way to test the waters without diving in too deep.

We need to wrap up soon. It has already been almost an hour. You have been a strong proponent of the Alternate Locate Provider program and I sincerely appreciate that.

I have watched you talk about the ALP in the United States. Sometimes the reaction is, those crazy Canadians, what are they doing now? They should stop drinking that five percent beer.

There seems to be a lack of willingness to replicate ALP in the United States. From what I have seen, and probably what you have seen, that appears to be the case. Is that really what is happening?

**Jemmie Wang (00:56:58):**

Yes, that is the case in the United States. I was in a session where they discussed what I would call ALP light in Georgia. That pilot only became reality because of pressure from a very determined contractor. He went to the state legislature and pushed relentlessly. Hats off to him.

I love ALP, but at a higher level I love anything that makes the system less rigid and gives stakeholders more options.

I am very supportive of what you are doing with ALP, but it is not just about that specific model. It is about reducing rigidity and increasing responsible options. I believe that almost any change that makes the system less rigid and gives stakeholders more vetted options will improve outcomes.

ALP is a poster child for that. I honestly believe that something like ALP is inevitable in the United States, even though many stakeholders do not want it today.

**Mike Sullivan (00:58:40):**

I hope you are right. Alberta is not the first. Ontario is doing something similar. We have followed models from other parts of the world such as Australia and New Zealand and added our own elements.

I think we are still at the tip of the iceberg with ALP. I can imagine where it might go someday.

If I want to travel, I open an app and choose an Uber. I select the driver, the type of vehicle, and the pick up time. All of the drivers on that platform have been vetted and trained.

I can see ALP evolving so that, as an excavator, I open an application and choose a locator from a list. All of them have been vetted and trained. I can trust whichever one I select. Pricing would fluctuate based on demand, just like ridesharing.

This kind of model could eventually replace some functions of the notification centre.

In our case, we have shifted significantly away from a large contact centre. We have reduced that footprint and redeployed those resources into the field: education, awareness, best practices committees, the Damage Information Reporting Tool, government relations, all of that. I think that is where things are heading. We are proving that, if you put locators through the proper checks, the system can work.

**Jemmie Wang (01:00:45):**

You and I are old enough to remember the world before Uber. When Uber first came in, there were all kinds of doomsday scenarios. People said there would be kidnappings and all sorts of safety issues.

The reality is that when I travel to a new country now, one of the first things I look for is whether Uber operates there. If it does, my life becomes easier. Costs are lower and my safety is often improved because Uber has done some vetting.

Local taxi companies may do very little vetting. Uber gives me options and transparency.

That is a good analogy for ALP. People ask, what if someone completely new to locating starts marking lines in downtown Montreal two hours after they are hired. The answer is that proper guardrails can prevent that. It is not going to happen.

I fully agree that ALP could evolve in that direction. It will not be perfect, but in conjunction with other checks and balances, it will be better than the 50 year old system we are relying on today.

**Mike Sullivan (01:02:23):**

I agree. We have been pushing hard for legislation in Alberta and that effort has been paused, for good reasons.

There has to be a balance. We need an environment that allows us to progress. We cannot be held back by the language of the law. Ideally, the law complements what we do and what we do complements the law. Perhaps the law can even grow with us. Imagine a more organic approach to legislation.

That is something we are working through.

I really appreciate you joining me, Jemmie. We have been talking about doing this for a while. You give a lot of kudos to ALP and to Alberta.

I am very fortunate. As I said earlier, I have been blessed with colleagues who give me room. They joke about it sometimes, but we could not have done anything in Alberta without my colleagues or my board.

In the early days, I would say, here is what I think we should do. They would look at me and say, you want to do what? They gave me enough rope to hang myself, but so far so good.

I could not work in an environment where I am too constrained to make progress. I would be stuck. I think we may need more of that freedom in other places. Boards need to provide incentives to make progress. Maybe that is where the next conversation needs to go.

**Jemmie Wang (01:04:08):**

I agree. I am very supportive of what you are doing in Alberta, Mike.

**Mike Sullivan (01:04:14):**

Thank you. It is good to have you on the podcast. I am sure I will see you again sometime in 2026. I am looking forward to it.

**Jemmie Wang (01:04:22):**

Thanks, Mike.

**Mike Sullivan (01:04:24):**

Thank you. Bye bye.

That is going to wrap things up on the podcast. I want to thank our producers at Stories and Strategies, and I hope you choose to follow this podcast on whichever directory you are listening on. Please leave a rating. We sincerely appreciate it when you do.

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I am Mike Sullivan, the president of Utility Safety Partners. Click to know what is above and below. One click costs you nothing. Not clicking could cost you everything.