

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

You're 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 ([00:15](#)):

Hi everybody, and thanks for joining me on the Safety Moment Podcast. My guest today is Mr. Brigham McCown. He's had a great career. He's still plenty engaged in that career, and I'm going to let him introduce himself. So let's get right into it right now. Brigham, thanks for joining us. How are you?

Brigham A. McCown ([00:32](#)):

I'm well. Thanks for having me on. I'm a longtime listener and really appreciate it.

Mike Sullivan ([00:39](#)):

Well, that's pretty cool. I don't know if I've had that many listeners come out to me and say, "Hey, I think I'd like to be on your podcast, so I really appreciate this." And we're talking like we've never met each other and we kind of haven't in a way. We've been exchanging emails. And anyway, I sincerely appreciate you doing this. And just before we started recording, you were telling me about, you were just on another podcast talking about an incident in Dallas. Maybe we can talk about that later. But before we do any of that - Yeah, sure. If you can introduce yourself, that would be great.

Brigham A. McCown ([01:07](#)):

Sure, absolutely. Hello everyone. I'm Brigham McCown and I say I've had a portfolio career. I've retired four times. And Mike, first from being a Naval aviator, second from being a lawyer, third from being a federal government executive and regulator. And fourth really from doing advisory and consulting work. And by the time this airs, I will have turned 60.

Mike Sullivan ([01:36](#)):

Well, I just turned 60 a short time ago and I haven't retired yet, so I'm way behind. I'm way behind, but I have had some career changes.

Brigham A. McCown ([01:45](#)):

Yeah. I mean, if you ask people around me, they'll say I'm not. I keep very busy. I serve on boards, including the US Department of Transportation's advisory board to the secretary. And so it continues, right? It just looks different now.

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

Well, it does. And you said you're retired from being a lawyer. Is that even possible? I mean, can you take the lawyer out of the guy?

Brigham A. McCown ([02:11](#)):

I think you can. I mean,

Mike Sullivan ([02:12](#)):

I

Brigham A. McCown ([02:12](#)):

Came into lawyering after I'd already been an operator, after I'd already been doing things and had had some policy backgrounds. So I think that gave me a little different perspective on it.

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

Yeah. I mean, I definitely would. Working with the federal regulator here in Canada, the National Energy Board, now the Canadian Energy Regulator, I was an inspection officer. So I was out in the field and I had to know that act and the legislation, the regulations back to front because I was going to be challenged on it no matter what. Whether not just be the regulations, but any of the safety manuals that were approved during a hearing or anything like that, I had to know it. And there was nobody standing beside me, a lawyer or anybody saying, oh, you can say this, you can't say that. You had to stand on your own two feet. So I got to work with the legal department at the National Energy Board very closely and got to know them very well. And it was a tremendous help because otherwise you're just standing out there by yourself.

([03:23](#)):

And so I had a really strong relationship with the legal team there and a great relationship with all of them. And some of them stood out to this day, a couple of them stand out really well. And also when I was working with Alliance Pipeline, I worked very closely with the legal department there. And people who think outside the box and lawyers are probably some of the best because that's what they have to do. So yeah, great appreciation for anybody in the legal profession. But before that, you said you were in the Navy.

Brigham A. McCown ([03:57](#)):

Yeah. Yeah.

Mike Sullivan ([03:58](#)):

And that's how you got your start.

Brigham A. McCown ([04:00](#)):

Yes, it is. And I was just sitting here thinking, I totally forgot about running a pipeline company too. So we'll have to get into that. But

Mike Sullivan ([04:10](#)):

Yeah,

Brigham A. McCown ([04:11](#)):

What's fascinating to me, and I think what really helped equip me, because the path I've taken through my career, I didn't wake up one day and said, "I want to do this. Check. I

Mike Sullivan ([04:22](#)):

Want to

Brigham A. McCown ([04:22](#)):

Do that. Check." And really that love of things that are where safety is involved, where operational performance is involved, where policy and law all come together. That's the theme, I guess, the glue that kind of weaves through everything. But Naval Aviation was one of the original high reliability safety cultures because back in the 1950s through the early '70s, we were losing people left and right. Planes were crashing, blowing up, falling over the side of the flight deck, getting damage from left behind tools. It was a disaster. And so Naval Aviation actually helped pioneer those operating habits that later became formalized in our SMS type culture, that standardization, discipline reporting, the lessons learned, checklist, risk management. Yeah, absolutely. Very helpful.

Mike Sullivan ([05:21](#)):

To the layman like me, you mentioned the checklist, that's where I immediately went to. You see it all the time, you hear it all the time. The pilots get on, doesn't matter how long they've been flying, a year or 30 years, they're going through that checklist every time. And you're absolutely right. In our industry, the safety industry, there is a checklist. Now, I think it changes. As we improve, we adopt best practices and then that checklist changes. But if you don't have that procedural mind to go through it every time, particularly as a foreman or the heavy equipment operator, you want to make sure that everybody's done exactly what they're supposed to do and nothing is left a chance. And as we spoke just before the recording began, it sounds like maybe something was left off that checklist in an event you were just talking about where there was a utility that was missed and damaged.

([06:18](#)):

And that happens. I think back to the mid 1980s in Canada, and this is before I got my start in the industry. And there was a major rupture on a gas transmission pipeline system in Ontario in Oshawa, Ontario. And there were two lines parallel. One was marked and one wasn't. And when the locator went to mark the other one, he wanted to induce a current and find a line. There was a ripper basically that was putting in cable or drain tile, sorry. And they decided to advance to the first set of flags. And what they didn't realize was that other parallel pipeline wasn't on the opposite side of the flags. It was before those flags. And he went right into that pipeline, massive explosion fatality. And that incident created the pipeline crossing regulations under the National Energy Board, which eventually became the damage prevention regulations.

([07:30](#)):

But these things unfortunately continue to happen. And that's what we're trying to avoid obviously, but they do continue to happen.

Brigham A. McCown ([07:36](#)):

They do. They do. And unpacking a couple of those things there. It's called the NATOPS manual in the Navy. We used to call it the Blue Sleeping Pill because the theory was if you slept with it, you'd learn more of it. But it's interesting, inside that front page, it says every crew member is required to know all the information contained in here. But then it says you're not supposed to try to remember what it says in there, hence the checklist. And it's the agreed method. And it doesn't mean you can't deviate. And this is sometimes a quagmire. I used to have this up at Aliuska in Alaska. We had an incident and we ended up shooting steel cables used to lift the pigs through the pipeline with the pig. And somebody said, "Well, it didn't say in the checklist not to do that." Well, you also

Mike Sullivan ([08:37](#)):

Have to

Brigham A. McCown ([08:37](#)):

Use common sense, right?

Mike Sullivan ([08:39](#)):

Yeah. Critical thinking. Yep. Yep.

Brigham A. McCown ([08:41](#)):

Yeah. So it's a little bit of both, but it's really very close to these SMS logic. If you think about it's policy, risk controls, assurance, and continuous improvement. So nothing is foolproof, and that's why we update the checklist. But I think when we are in industries that involve machinery, equipment, it can be a very dangerous place. And in

Mike Sullivan ([09:13](#)):

The

Brigham A. McCown ([09:13](#)):

Case, the Navy, the average person walking around a flight deck is 19 years old. Landing planes on aircraft is not normal. It's

Mike Sullivan ([09:24](#)):

Dangerous. And

Brigham A. McCown ([09:24](#)):

So how do you de-risk that? And from being the FMSA regulator, it's all about consequence management and likelihood management to try to peel that curve down. But sometimes we have a bad day and that checklist will keep you from forgetting. It's so important.

Mike Sullivan ([09:48](#)):

Well, it is. And those checklists are made up again between legislation, regulation, standards, best practice. And one of my pet peeves is when dealing with the Common Ground Alliance or the regional partners here in Canada is when they're looking at best practices and people not realizing the relationship between those four or three, I guess, legislation regulations. I put those in the same bucket, standards and best practice. I mean, unless the standard is incorporated by reference, it's not going to be legislated. It's essentially a best practice. But sometimes when people don't realize that relationship, they're unwilling to recognize a best practice, which is beyond the minimum requirements of legislation. And as well, it's not legislation. Well, no, it's not. And maybe we don't want it to be. So yeah, I find it's frustrating, but a checklist doesn't consider that. It considers what is the right thing to do and it's always evolving.

([10:55](#)):

And a checklist essentially is a best practice. It's always getting better. And anyway, but we're kind of deviating from what we were going to talk about, which is great. I love that about these podcasts. You just do whatever you want. You go where the conversation takes you. But when we initially connected a little while ago, we were talking about, I can't remember exactly what we were talking about, but I think

we were talking about the branding of 811 and Click Before You Dig here in Canada. And you were part of FEMSA when 811 was rolled out. So that was probably what, the mid 2000s, I guess? 2005 - ish, six?

Brigham A. McCown ([11:35](#)):

Yeah, it was. You've got a great memory. Yeah. FMSA was a new agency. It was created by Norman Mineta, which is interesting. A Democrat serving in a Republican administration. Oh, the bygone years when we could get along, right? Yeah.

Mike Sullivan ([11:54](#)):

Oh,

Brigham A. McCown ([11:55](#)):

They'll

Mike Sullivan ([11:56](#)):

Come again. They'll come again.

Brigham A. McCown ([11:58](#)):

It'll come again. Yeah. Yeah. And I think people forget that used to be the norm that President Obama had Bill Gates over at defense and so forth and so on. And Norm said, look, before FMSA, there was something called RISPA Research and Special Projects. It was a catch over from the USDOT that was left over after aviation, surface, rail, et cetera, got all put cars, automobiles got put together. And he said,

Mike Sullivan ([12:33](#)):

"We

Brigham A. McCown ([12:33](#)):

Need a dedicated hazmat, dangerous goods," as the rest of the world, and you guys call them, "and pipeline agency, one that can kind of be across the whole department. And it needs to have pipelines because back then, I think it was 2.5 or 2.6 million miles of pipe. Now the US has 3.4 to 3.6, depending on who you talk to, regulated million miles of pipeline the US. So yeah, 811 was something that had gotten stuck for a number of years because in the US, region by region, state by state, you had different phone numbers to call

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

On this utility. Yeah. Same here in Canada.

Brigham A. McCown ([13:18](#)):

Yeah. And so yes, I got to push it over the finish line and roll it out. And as we talked about it, it was really an eight step evolution. First, that public awareness call before you dig. The second one, which we got done, was the single access point. One phone number nationally. And trying to get, you can imagine this, right? Trying to get the federal government to give you a three-digit phone number was

Mike Sullivan ([13:48](#)):

Like

Brigham A. McCown ([13:48](#)):

Pulling teeth. Well,

Mike Sullivan ([13:50](#)):

The equity, there's only so many of them, right?

Brigham A. McCown ([13:53](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Only so many of them. And then third, that notification and ticketing. Okay. Well, that's step three on what we had envisioned. And some might argue that's about as far as we got because.

([14:09](#)):

But okay, let's give them the fourth step, digital ticket status so that the process is visible and auditable somewhere. But what we had envisioned, and certainly I was a big proponent of that, was GIS native mapping tied to the actual location to then be tied into a three-dimensional subsurface model. And then eventually you wouldn't pick up a phone number. And phone numbers were landlines were still a thing in 05, but you should be able to pick up an iPad and draw a circle, a square, a box and say right here. And if you had used GPNS enabled wands or other technology, eventually over time, that subsurface becomes less than a complete unknown, which is really where we still are.

([15:01](#)):

And it would at least be tied in. And over time, that information can be used for first responders. You can cut down on the amount of surface area that you've got to mark, making it more efficient. I don't know how many of us have gone out and said, "I want to dig in this small little area." And you go out and the entire four-lane interstate, crossroads are marked. And in today's day and age, we can go to AI assisted risk screening and that positive feedback loop where the tickets are audited and where damages, near miss, mismarks, that after action, that's the continuous improvement loop. And at least in the States, we're still not there. But you guys have all figured this out, right?

Mike Sullivan ([15:56](#)):

Oh, I wish. I mean, no, we haven't. And this is one thing I want to talk to you about, and I'm going to mention it now before I forget, but there's an absence of what I will call comprehensive legislation in Canada. So the Province of Ontario secured, I'll call it click before you dig, call before you dig, damage prevention legislation in Ontario in that province back in, I think it was 2012. So it's been around for a while now. And it's the Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, I think is basically what it's called. And what it did, it created Ontario One Call, which was already there from a different perspective, but now it solidified it as a requirement. Now, other provinces, they wanted to follow suit. And Alberta was no different. We wanted to follow suit as well. But one of the things we got to learn, and I've always been a strong proponent of the legislation, I still believe legislation is a proper tool.

([17:01](#)):

But one of the things we began to learn was that legislation, if it's not drafted properly, and from your legal background, I think you'll appreciate this, it can also hinder progress. For example, we rolled out in August 2024 the alternate locate provider program, ALP. And it was the right thing to do and it's proven to be very successful. It's reducing damages dramatically. And not even by a smidge, but by a wide margin. And I don't think we would've been able to do it as nimbly or with much flexibility, and definitely

not in the speed that we did, which wasn't really that fast when you look at it, but we would not have been able to do it under a legislative environment. And a few other things we've done as well. We wouldn't have been able to do them the way we did. And yet that legislation to require a person to initiate the damage prevention process every time before excavating is beneficial.

(18:14):

You can't ignore that. But once you start down that road, okay, you're going to initiate the locate request process. And then we start getting into the operations side of it. And that to me is where we begin to stifle the ingenuity. We begin to stifle progress.

(18:35):

If we can hold back and just have that higher requirement in the legislation saying, "You must initiate the locate request process before every excavation, full stop. And then you let everything else evolve the way it should." That's what's holding us back. And maybe, as you mentioned, are we there yet in the US? Have we done everything that you just mentioned? Because technologically, the capabilities are there. We just haven't married them all in and cost, et cetera. And depending who you talk to, some will say, "Well, the system doesn't want to evolve because the way it works, there's reasons for the way it is." But I think legislation has a part in that. It gets too detailed and then you can't advance.

Brigham A. McCown (19:26):

Yeah, I think you're spot on. And in the US, theoretically, the pipeline program is reauthorized. That's when our Congress takes a look at the current statutory language. Not the money side, but on the programmatic side every five years. Now, that's supposed to happen. What really happens? Well, that should have happened more than a year ago. Didn't happen. Still not happening this year, although things are slowly advancing. The difficulty of government, and you're right, I like that sort of, I would call that in my company, the president or the CEO's intent. "Hey, here's what I want you all to do, but I'm not the expert. I'm not the technical person. I'd leave it to you to figure out how to best accomplish it. If you try to micromanage, it doesn't work. And to your point, you can actually slow things down because once something is written in law, it's difficult to change.

(20:33):

And honestly, that's by intent. At least in the states, we want things to go very slowly. We want things to take probably longer than they should under the theory we will hopefully not pass something that's disastrous. And similarly, the regulatory process in the states is also extremely slow under that same theory. Let's put something out. Let's study the data. Let's get comments. Let's go back and edit it. Let's come back again. The problem with that, it's very

(21:12):

Good from not a political conservative, but from a, let's make sure we're getting it right standpoint. But that regulatory lag, as I call it, technology is turning over far faster. Way faster. Than you can regulate. So hence, yeah, these best practices, other pieces. And yes, you should do those. And to my friends that say, I guess if the minimum wasn't good enough, it wouldn't be the minimum. Well, maybe every best practice doesn't fit in every instance. But if you have tools available, and that's what frustrates me with pipeline tools for a long time. If you found any anomaly, you had to go dig it up and investigate. You had to go do direct assessment. And so you got high def tools that were capable of finding things so small that were there when they left the plant. And people are like, "Well, I don't want to run a high def tool because what I don't see, I don't have to dig up." And think about that for a minute, right?

(22:22):

Yep.

Mike Sullivan ([22:24](#)):

Well, you're right. And that's where I remember back, and this is going back quite a ways. I left the National Energy Board almost 25 years ago, and they had shifted to goal-oriented regulation with the onshore pipeline regulations. And it was successful, but I remember being an inspector at the time, how do we administer that? That was a challenge. It was a total about face of how we were doing things before, but I got it. I mean, it made sense. I mean, not all the governed assets were the same, obviously. Not all of them are big, giant transmission pipelines that go from across vast distances. Some of them were small feeder lines, but because of where they were situated, they come under federal legislation or governance. So the goal oriented regulation made a lot of sense, but it wasn't easy for the person in the field like me who had to administer that new language was challenging.

([23:26](#)):

But there is a place for it. And you have to get, I think, somewhat creative with the legislative language to capture everything. And we found ourselves there. And then going back to what I was saying earlier, had we been successful with the legislation, and I'm still high waiver back and forth here, but had we been successful adopting or bringing in the legislation that we tabled here in Alberta a couple of years ago? And it was a valiant effort. It was a lot of effort that went into it.

([24:04](#)):

I don't know if we would've been able to roll these things out that we have. And the fact is, if the new practices are reducing damages and dramatically, well, if we couldn't have done that, what would we be dealing with today? Would we be dealing with a situation where a fatality, for example? I don't know. And that to me is, if you have to look at it under progress, that's it. You have to do the right thing. But it's challenging. It's really hard to do that.

Brigham A. McCown ([24:41](#)):

It is really hard. And I think to your point, it's interesting because FMSA is a single agency that has two very disparate programs. They're both arguably dangerous goods, but the pipeline side tries to use performance-based regulations under the theory that not every pipeline's the same. Whereas the dangerous goods side of FMSA being internationally harmonized, it is very prescriptive, uber prescriptive. And it's almost like the agency has two different personalities. And while I don't know that either is perfect, there is certainly a case to be made for a blend of it and for operators to tailor their own policies and procedures based on their operating conditions. And we've got more underground stuff than we ever had. I'm also chair over at the Alliance for Innovation-

Mike Sullivan ([25:50](#)):

Innovation Infrastructure.

Brigham A. McCown ([25:51](#)):

Yeah. Easy for me to say. Innovation

Mike Sullivan ([25:53](#)):

Infrastructure. I love my screen. I'm cheating.

Brigham A. McCown ([25:56](#)):

Yeah. Oh, okay. All, and we're in our 12th year now. And that is a nonpartisan think tank that was put together to take a look at pressing infrastructure challenges, primarily in the USA, but you're giving me some great ideas. I don't know, maybe it ought to be North America. And the point of it, a lot of the work that we do is on damage prevention. And clearly following the rollout of 811, following on the pipeline side, at least some of the programs that we put in place for that holistic approach to pipelines, the integrity management programs has been very helpful, driving accidents down a lot. The truth is we all pat ourselves on the back, or at least some of us do, every year and go, "Oh, accidents are down."

Mike Sullivan ([26:47](#)):

They're

Brigham A. McCown ([26:47](#)):

Not down that much.

Mike Sullivan ([26:50](#)):

Well, and when you have voluntary reporting, who knows why they're down?

Brigham A. McCown ([26:56](#)):

Yes. Yeah, you're right. Some people, some of the locate services don't even report. So All took, in the US, what was known as there was a 20 million mile number of underground infrastructure. There was a 35 million. Both of those, and they're still used, frankly, by a lot of people. Those are decades outdated. And All came up with, "Hey, it's closer to 50 million miles," as really the current benchmark. And based on going state by state and looking through all the data, that's probably right. It's very crowded underground. We have more things than ever. And the ecosystem of locate excavate is based on ambiguity and tolerance zones. And unfortunately, the apartment building that exploded in Dallas last month was a case of that where they called 811. Lines were marked, but there were multiple gas lines and they missed one. It was polyurethane and hard to find.

[28:04](#):

Instead of using hand tools, they went in and crimped it. And then yeah, things went from there. So

Mike Sullivan ([28:12](#)):

In

Brigham A. McCown ([28:12](#)):

This day and age, that is just terrible.

Mike Sullivan ([28:15](#)):

It is. And I have met Benjamin, your colleague with All some years ago. Oh, great. And we've connected on a variety of things. He's actually come to Alberta to speak one of our conferences. And I know he worked very closely with Scott Landis to author that book that's coming out soon, Holding Back Disaster. I'm intrigued by All. I love the work that you're doing. And when you talk about, I'm going to come back to 811 here for a moment, the work that you did years ago and what you experienced, what you observed when 811 rolled out. And that was a monumental shift. It was definitely what the industry

needed, that single point of contact. And this was really, I mean, we had the internet then, but we were in our infancy with the internet then. I remember when we first got email at the National Energy Boarding in 1996, everybody's mind was blown.

(29:16):

But we were still in our infancy, kind of like we are right now with artificial intelligence. We are at the tip of the spear there and we really don't know what we don't know. Mind you, AI will tell us because it's going to know before we do.

(29:33):

But we wanted that so bad here, that three digit dialing in Canada. And I found myself at the forefront of that initiative to bring 811 into Canada. Now it didn't work because 811 was already assigned to telehealth. And even though at the time no province was really using it, but that changed very quickly. And I have a feeling that the Canadian Common Ground Alliances poking and prodding in that 811 space may have initiated some speed on behalf of telehealth. But be that as it may, we didn't get it. And instead we initiated clickbeforeyoudig.com. And at the time it was, okay, well we'll do this and it made sense. But then we found out here in Alberta, we discovered that, and really on a hunch, that low-key requests submitted online, this goes back to what you were saying at the very beginning of our chat here.

(30:32):

Locate requests submitted online, you draw your polygon, I am digging here in this space and I need a locate for this space, wherever that size might be. And then the locator goes out and they locate in that space.

(30:49):

I had a hunch that damages that in relation to how the locate request was submitted, be it on phone or online, locates submitted online would have less damage than a locate made over the phone. And so we did some sleuthing and lo and behold, we found out that was right. Greater than 50% less damages online when you look at them equally. And then I went out across Canada and I said, "Is anybody else seeing this?" And only Ontario came back with some feedback and they said, "You know what? You're right. And to your point, we're seeing an even more compelling result than you found in Alberta. We're seeing a higher result or less damages online." And then I went out to my colleagues across the US and I said, "Are you seeing this?" And nobody really wanted to get back to me. I guess I was poking the bear.

(31:45):

But this is what I'm getting at here, Brigham, is my concern is we've evolved. And just like a best practice, we're going to get better. We're going to get better. We're going to find a better mousetrap. And 811 is a tremendous brand. It is so good and it has been adopted. And the CGA has virtually no budget for promotions and awareness, but they don't need it because pipeline companies and all their members are taking that brand and they're amplifying it. And it's a textbook study on how to do it the right way. And they just managed. It has worked out that way. But at what point does style over substance come in? And are we there? Are we at that tipping point? If we know, and I think 811 and those who use it, they have shifted in recent years to just, not to say call, but make sure you submit a locate request through 811 or whatever they're saying.

(32:49):

Because the realization is that we got to go online. And if you can order a pizza online, you could submit a locate request online. And if the damages are less, you can't ignore that. You can't ignore it. But at some point, I guess my question to you is, at some point, that tipping point will happen where the

substance and the style of the brand, is it still the best choice? Now, if you were to put your FEMSA hat back on or your legal hat back on, what would be your take on that? How do you manage that?

Brigham A. McCown ([33:29](#)):

Yeah. I can tell you, successive administrators have called me the godfather of FEMSA. I don't accept that. And that's not true, right? Because we always know it's not the leader, it's all the people that are working there, number one. But I do get asked, "Well, what about 81?" I said, "Hey guys, I hope one day, maybe we call it 811, maybe we call it something else." And people don't even remember what the original meaning of it was, right? Because we moved on. We didn't have a widespread internet in 2005. So to your point, thank you. I think 811 was a success.

Mike Sullivan ([34:11](#)):

Absolutely.

Brigham A. McCown ([34:12](#)):

But it should be seen by everyone as the beginning of modern damage prevention, not the end of it. And frankly, I have some criticisms there. We tend to rest on our laurels sometime. And that's fine, but okay, that was 21 years ago, guys. The next step is to move from that notification culture to a knowledge culture, and then from knowledge to predictive safety. And I think you can say that 811 is a simple, memorable safety entry point, but it didn't create an integrated digital view of the infrastructure. And so in the polygons, I was laughing and most people may not know that the coordinates are redeveloped into these polygons. But we need to move to a pure digital point and move from a call before you dig into a know before you dig.

Mike Sullivan ([35:14](#)):

Yes.

Brigham A. McCown ([35:14](#)):

That's

Mike Sullivan ([35:15](#)):

What

Brigham A. McCown ([35:15](#)):

I would love to see.

Mike Sullivan ([35:17](#)):

I agree because even click before you dig, it's going to have a life. And when the next best thing comes along, then we need to pivot to whatever that next best thing is. Absolutely. And I think that day it's coming. Artificial intelligence will remind us to get your locates before you buy that wood at home hardware or Home Depot, whatever it might be. It's going to know what you're up to beforehand. So if you're browsing on your mobile device or whatever, and you're looking at planting a tree, then you'll get an ad. This is how you do your locate online. And maybe it's click for the time being, but it's going to be something else. It's going to be exactly what you said, know before you digger or whatever. You have to

know this. And even maybe when you go and purchase something, that receipt of what you've purchased for that fence or whatever it is you're doing, you've rented an auger, it's going to prompt you.

(36:19):

It's going to go into a system that your name is attached to this receipt. You're going to get prompted again. There is no telling where this can go, but I think the human factor will be taken out of it quite a bit. It'll be artificial intelligence prodding us to do the right thing.

Brigham A. McCown (36:41):

Yeah, I think it will. And does there ever become a time where, because the underground infrastructure changes, right? We're laying cables, we're putting stuff down constantly, but in some places it doesn't change that much. And so is there a way where every homeowner, every business owner gets a plat map that shows exactly where everything is with distance markers, GPS coordinates, and then when there's an update or construction or unearthing takes place, it gets updated. I don't know. Is there a time when a firetruck. Another great North American piece that we've all done together is the Emergency Response Guidebook, the ERG that is carried in every first responder throughout North America. That's a joint publication of Transport Canada, USDOT and Mexico Transportation, all SCT down there. Well, is there a day when the fire captain in his front cab looks up at the screen as they're rolling into somewhere and he can say, "Pull up all the underground infrastructure.

(37:54):

Where's my nearest natural gas valve?" We can do that and we should do that.

Mike Sullivan (38:01):

Yeah. I mean, we have that data today. And you're right. I mean, even the level of data that us as a notification center that we have, or my colleagues have, there's a certain level of data that we have, but there's a certain level of data that we don't. The located service providers, they have that extra layer of knowledge that we don't. And that knowledge that should be given to, like you said, emergency response providers. But there's a concern, I think, out there that once that data is out there and you're not controlling it anymore, can it be used for nefarious reasons? And yes, of course it can. And at the end of the day, for my utility safety partners and others working the same space as I am, we're just curators at that day. We don't own it. We are curators of data and we are.

(38:58):

The utility owners set up the "one call centers" years ago. And we have to abide by their wishes. But I think there's a struggle within those utility owners. How much data can we provide? How much can we release? Unfortunately, we live in that time now. And so there's a concern of if I'm going to provide you with this data, there's an agreement that it doesn't go any further, almost like an NDA essentially. Doesn't go any further and you're going to use it for this purpose. And that becomes difficult to control too because the moment you hand it over, all the NDAs in the world don't necessarily mean a lot.

Brigham A. McCown (39:45):

Yeah, it doesn't. And it's that balancing of interests. And can we put something together where we can limit some access yet still get the data out there? Because when we talk about the marking of underground utilities, especially pipelines, the whole point is everyone should know where they are so you don't hit it. That's the stakes, the markers. And after nine eleven, when I was at the agency, I got a call from the deputy secretary and said, "Can you come up for a minute?" I said, "Sure." And I went up and he said, "Hey, DHS wants us to bring down the national pipeline mapping system." I said, "The

whole thing?" He said, "Yes, the whole thing." I said, "Oh." He goes, "No, it gets better. They want you to take every placard off of every hazmat load."

Mike Sullivan ([40:34](#)):

Oh boy.

Brigham A. McCown ([40:35](#)):

I said, "What?" And they said, "Yeah." They said, "People might know what's in it." And I go, "Did you tell them that's the whole point?"

Mike Sullivan ([40:41](#)):

That's the point. That's what

Brigham A. McCown ([40:42](#)):

The ERG does for you, right? You look

Mike Sullivan ([40:44](#)):

Up

Brigham A. McCown ([40:44](#)):

Your four-digit number. And so you have these battles back and forth. And we didn't obviously take placarding

Mike Sullivan ([40:54](#)):

Off

Brigham A. McCown ([40:54](#)):

Of things. But we were forced to bring down the mapping system for a while, and it's still a little clunky, at least in our country, with what you can actually see. And I think these are important questions that we're going to have to continue to work through.

Mike Sullivan ([41:12](#)):

Yeah, I agree. And I know the Canada Energy Regulator has its own mapping system as well. It shows where these federally regulated transmission pipelines are. And I mean, I get it, the public information, but do we really need to put it out there for the whole world to see? Maybe not. I don't know. That's just me, Mike Sullivan, my view. If I really needed to know that information, then I should be able to write to the regulator or to the pipeline company and say, "You know what? I'm doing this. I need to know. Well, what you're doing sounds like excavation, Mike, then maybe submit a locate request. You'll know exactly where it is." And if I'm building a major transition project and I want to find out where utilities are, I have to go through the same process. So I've always been very curious, what was the driving force behind the regulator putting out these national mapping systems, showing where all these assets are?

([42:14](#)):

When I worked with Alliance Pipeline, I joined that company shortly after nine eleven. And we had to put together a security program that was because the assets went all the way to Chicago. We had to put it in together a security management program that Homeland Security was going to review and determine whether or not it met the requirements. Similar, we had another authority here in Canada that we had to respond to. And I think we've forgotten all that.

(42:57):

When I see these mapping systems come out, it's like, okay, it's nice to look at, but why? What do we need that for? There are other systems in place. If you need to know where the assets are, you can find out.

Brigham A. McCown (43:11):

Yeah, you can find out. And we did while I was at FIMSA. We actually had a couple of instances where bad people were trying to figure out pipelines. One in particular went into a major airport and how could

Mike Sullivan (43:26):

They

Brigham A. McCown (43:27):

Do something? How could they blow it up? So this has happened in the past. I think it's a tough one because as landowner rights, people want to know when they are purchasing a piece of property where things are - Makes sense. On them, where things might go. And I don't know, in an urban corridor context,

(43:49):

And there've been a couple of these projects, so some of them say, "Well, no, they've done that before." But I would love to see nationally the ability for, let's say my street out front in Washington DC, they're going to repave it in six months or next year. It's on next year's budget. So they push something out to everybody that says, "Hey, guess what? We're going to be repaving the street. This is your great opportunity to do repairs, upgrades, fixes. Let's get company representatives together and work through this." Because to me, there's nothing more maddening than as soon as you put down new concrete or new asphalt, it gets dug up because somebody's like, "Oh, this was on our schedule for three months from now." And there's got to be a way. We're not only wanting to protect our workers and our public citizens, we're wanting to protect the infrastructure and we're wanting to eliminate delay damages, expenses, problems.

(44:52):

And so there just seems like, at least in my perfect world look, Mike, there would be a way to kind of piece all these together.

Mike Sullivan (45:02):

Oh, utility coordination council. They've popped up around the globe over the years. I know there was one here in Alberta many, many years ago, which became essentially the Alberta Common Ground Alliance. And that part of it though, the utility coordination to manage exactly what you just described, that seems to have disappeared. Now, maybe it exists within municipalities. I'm not privy to that. I don't know. But to the level that it was initially, and I do remember the AULCC, the Alberta Utility Location

Coordination Council, and it's exactly what it was designed to do. And I sat on that council when I was with the feds. We didn't have a lot of crossings under major roadways, and there wasn't that much activity. But for the more common distribution assets, yeah, they're there all the time. And if you can coordinate that, I mean, you're managing budgets, you're helping the municipal purse if you're coordinating this properly.

(46:10):

And that's where as a homeowner, as a taxpayer, yep, that hits me right in the pocketbook. I'm interested. You're talking my language. And it just seems to be so elementary that we do that, and yet I don't think we are anymore. Not to my knowledge.

Brigham A. McCown (46:28):

I think it's just the way you've probably seen these in the government and in companies you've worked for. There has to be a champion. And they get it off the ground and it works really well. And then they get transferred or they retire. And then it's like it never happened again. You're constantly recreating

Mike Sullivan (46:45):

Wheels. Start all

Brigham A. McCown (46:46):

Over again. So how do we put those processes, policies, and checklists in place so that we're not having to go one step back or just forgetting about it when that institutional knowledge leaves?

Mike Sullivan (47:01):

Exactly. And that's maybe a greater fear today because you've had four or five or six different careers in your time. I've had a couple always in the same area, but the likelihood of somebody, like my dad started with Bell Canada and his dad was at Bell Canada from the beginning and when he started his career and they stayed there and they got their pension or whatever. And that is so uncommon today. It's not going to happen. And maybe that's part of the problem too. That champion that is going to hold whatever it might be, in this case, utility coordination, they move on. And the next person behind them, they're going to move on too. Everybody's more looking at their own career pathway than looking at something more tangible.

Brigham A. McCown (47:55):

I think that's highly accurate. When I talk to the Gen Zs and some of the younger folks, they think it's totally normal to change not only jobs, but companies two, three years. And I get that. And if you think about it, inside a larger corporate culture or military or government, it's called a rotational assignment. And you do want to learn different aspects of the business. Totally. But yeah, you're not going to the same place your grandfather worked, your father worked. And so it's really more about, kind of gets back to the beginning, how do we institutionalize these processes?

Mike Sullivan (48:36):

Yeah. Yep. I don't think we're going to solve it, but the fact that we're talking about it, we know it exists. We know that's another problem. And maybe that's why some things we talked about earlier, brand recognition. What I'm seeing here in Canada is that brand saturation. Maybe that's why, because when somebody new comes in, "Oh, I got an idea and I'm going to do this." And now you have two brands and

three brands that are somewhat basically promoting the same thing, but now you're confusing people. And inadvertently, nobody wants to confuse anybody, but we are. And that's one of the problems I'm seeing in Canada. And that might be one of the symptoms of it is people coming in and then moving on. Another person comes in, "I got a better idea. I'm going to do this instead." We're not institutionalizing certain things that need to be and passing that torch.

(49:35):

We were just lighting new torches and that doesn't seem to work.

Brigham A. McCown (49:40):

Absolutely.

Mike Sullivan (49:41):

Before we go, I wanted to touch on the AI and the work that you're doing there. We spoke about it just briefly, but that organization has published some great reports, a damage prevention report. The last one I saw, I think was 2024. There may be a new one. Where do you think that organization's going to go? And I think the work it's doing is tremendous. I love it. Where do you think it's going to go?

Brigham A. McCown (50:12):

Yeah, thanks so much. We're a nonprofit, so we don't have oodles of resources. We're not a brick and mortar when we were set it up. This is way before COVID. We set it up as a virtual nonprofit. People are like, "Oh, how will that

Mike Sullivan (50:31):

Work?"

Brigham A. McCown (50:32):

What does that mean?

(50:33):

Yeah. How does that. And so our folks live all over the country and it's worked out pretty well. So you've mentioned Ben and his staff there, and then we have a advisory board. We also bring fellows on for expertise. And then we have the governing board that I'm a member of. And I think really our idea is to remain independent, nonpartisan, national research and educational organization. We pitch a tent and invite people in. Sometimes we think we have the answers, but more than not, it's about the conversation. How do we advance innovation across the industry and advance public policy? And Mike, you'll get a kick out of this. When we started, we didn't know any better. I wanted innovation in the name because I thought it was important. How do you address pressing challenges? But about two or three years ago, somebody came up and said, "Hey, do you realize you guys are the only infrastructure think tank in the country?" And we said, "Well, that can't be right.

(51:38):

No, that can't possible. They got all these." They said, "Well, no, you've got some that are dedicated to aviation, some that are dedicated to Common Ground Alliance with damage engine, but not someone who touches just infrastructure wide." And that was a wow moment. We didn't start out to do that, but I think we're recognized as a voice of reason, a balance

Mike Sullivan ([52:05](#)):

Of

Brigham A. McCown ([52:05](#)):

Nonpartisan analysis. We've testified in front of Congress. We've been on every major news outlet. We're quoted and everything. That is quite an honor and a testament.

Mike Sullivan ([52:22](#)):

And

Brigham A. McCown ([52:24](#)):

Every week we have these conversations about, "Hey, we've turned down a lot of donors, quite frankly, because they want something." And like, guys, we may have the same viewpoint you have, but that's not how this works. I don't know if this is inside baseball or not, but so many research organizations that sound good, they're all paid to play. Citizens for reliable. I'm just making something up. Citizens for reliable cellular service. Well, there's money behind that somewhere,

Mike Sullivan ([53:03](#)):

Right? Yes, exactly. Sounds like a sales pitch.

Brigham A. McCown ([53:06](#)):

Yeah, it does. And so this is your podcast, but hey, if anybody wants to leave us some money, that'd be fantastic because we really put, I don't know, 95% of what we get straight into the mission and into producing things. And so that's really important to us, but we also want to listen to others. If you have great ideas, we would like to hear them. So that's really, I think All's mission is to continue to be part of the solution and to be good listeners and to be good conveners, third party validators.

Mike Sullivan ([53:44](#)):

Well, all the experience I've had with All has been tremendous. We mentioned very early that, is there an opportunity to work in Canada? Because I can't think of any outfit in Canada that does this. And I think it's necessary. As you said, there may have been some similar, but the finances that were backing it, they had their own agenda. And you lose credibility right off the hop if that's the case. And that's a challenge. So I would love to have a future conversation about that. How could this initiative expand to other countries?

Brigham A. McCown ([54:28](#)):

Yeah, that sounds wonderful. And I'd love to do it and have that conversation with you for certain and see if we can collaborate. I'm also a huge proponent. I grew up in Ohio, which you tell Ohio and say, "We're a border state." And they're like, "What border?" Because Canada, that's not really a border, is it? Well, there are relatives, our neighbors, our friends.

Mike Sullivan ([54:56](#)):

Well, you're further north than some of the Canadian cities.

Brigham A. McCown ([55:00](#)):

Yes. Yes, that's true. And so when I look at it, I look at North American integration. And the truth is we have a lot of integration, whether it's in trade. All the cars from when I was a kid, they all said Fisher Auto Body on them from Ontario. And our energy, our electricity grids, things are interoperable. And I'd like a lot more of that to happen.

Mike Sullivan ([55:32](#)):

Yeah, me too. Me too. I grew up in the eastern part of Canada, in Quebec, in Montreal. And my forefathers, my grandfather was born in New Hampshire. And when he was very young, he was shipped to Montreal because they had better medical services and he was quite sickly. He became a Canadian, I guess. I don't know how they did it back then, but he just was Canadian. Married my grandmother and they had a family. And it wasn't until he died very young, but it wasn't until many, many, many years later that one of my uncles found his birth certificate and my mom and my aunts and uncles became dual citizens. And at the time, I could have enacted application for a green card and I didn't do it. Didn't see what was necessary. But some of my cousins, they ended up working in the US and they became US citizens.

([56:22](#)):

And we are far more alike than, yes, we have our own individual things and be Canadian, that's what makes you American. But at the same time, JFK said it really well. And I don't know, I can't remember the exact quote, but we're neighbors. And politics aside, we always want to be good neighbors. And the collaboration, doing this today, for example, is a testament to what being a good neighbor is.

Brigham A. McCown ([56:57](#)):

Absolutely. And I was actually up in your country. I'm trying to remember when was that? Just in your capital last month, talking to a group for a project called the Second Century Commission, which because of Canada's role prior to independence, they're actually, y'all are just now starting your second hundred years of official relations with the US. And it was about, they wanted to hear from people about, "Hey, what should we as Canadians be thinking about in the next century? And what should you guys as Americans be thinking about too?" And I was thrilled and honored to be able to come up and do that. And I think that's

Mike Sullivan ([57:44](#)):

Exactly

Brigham A. McCown ([57:45](#)):

The right approach.

Mike Sullivan ([57:46](#)):

Oh, I think so too. And I sincerely appreciate you doing this with me today. Of course. I love the fact that we can, and I love the fact that we do. And I collaborate with people across Canada and across the US proudly. And I look forward to the day when all this rhetoric that's sort of behind the scenes and flavoring in all relations just goes away and we get back to being just regular neighbors again. But for me, it has never changed. And I sincerely appreciate you doing this with me today. Thank you.

Brigham A. McCown ([58:23](#)):

Absolutely. Thanks for having me on and inviting me, and I look forward to chatting with you more in the future.

Mike Sullivan ([58:29](#)):

I do too. Thanks, Brigham. That's going to wrap things up on the Safety Moment Podcast. I want to thank our producers' stories and strategies. And I hope you choose to follow this podcast on any directory you're listening on. And please do leave a rating. We appreciate it very much. You can follow us on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Avon X, and you can send us a message if you wish to info@utilitysafety.ca. If you have something you want to tell us, if you have an episode idea, certainly please tell us that and put podcast in big, bold letters in the subject header. My name is Mike Sullivan. I'm the president of Utility Safety Partners and your host on The Safety Moment. Thank you for joining us. And please remember, one click costs you nothing. Not clicking, that could cost you everything.