COUNTRY ROAD OR FOUR-LEAF CLOVERS

John Denver created the image of the simple country road with one of his songs. In it, there was north, south, east and west and a crossroads in which a wayward traveler would make simple choices. Usually these choices were made a very slow rate of speed. The person in this image was either walking or in the early days of our country traveling by horse or wagon. Today even the roughest of roads can be traversed using a 4 wheel drive vehicle. And, if Denver was correct should lead you home.

Compare that image with the freeway mazes that sometimes carve up the landscape in our metropolitan communities. There are flyways, flyovers, underpasses, overpasses, and entire inventory of ways in which you can make decisions as to where you are going to go, but you have to make decisions fast. Nobody has the opportunity to look at a map when they enter a four leaf clover. They better know where they are going and they better have some idea on how they are going to get there or they shouldn't be on the highway.

I would like to draw this analogy to the concept of working on the fire and building codes of today. In my collection are some of the earliest copies of building codes from the early 1900s. My collection includes copies of when I first got involved in code work the 1960s. There were pioneers like Robert Gaines that popularized the idea of making the rules relatively simple and then hoping we could gain compliance and subsequent fire protection by following those rules. There are veterans of the process like Lee Wheeler that make it all look easy. But it is not getting any easier.

After recently sitting on code hearings in 2012 I was thinking to myself: "I wonder what Robert Gaines would think if he were here today? Rooms full of very intense people with computers. A veritable machine gun staccato of side-bar conversations going on in the hallway and a decision making process that compressed a year's worth of work down into a five or ten minute presentation before a panel . You couldn't go to the bathroom for fear of missing something.

Don't get me wrong with this visual image, I am not complaining about it, I am just recognizing it. We no longer have a simple road to follow when it comes to understanding what codes and standards mean to modern civilization. It is a complex, incredibly convoluted and multi-dimensional set of conditions and circumstances. We better have a good map and a compass if we hope to navigate it.

What may eventually happen could be similar to what happened in the medical profession. At one time doctors weren't just doctors. They were something else, like a barber or sore owner. Then they began to recognize their need to have a specific body of knowledge and they created qualification to become a doctor. Soon after that they begin to specialize. Now there are doctors that are highly specialized and only deal with one component of the human body. I would not be surprised if somewhere out there; there is a left ear doctor versus a right ear doctor. For all I know they may have a certification system

based on the difference. Specialization is when you slice and dice things down to the point where a limited number of people possess the maximum amount of knowledge and a maximum number of people only possess the minimum amount of knowledge.

When that scenario will unfold in the code world is not known at this point, so I can only speculate. At the rate of change of code development today, however, it is easy to predict that it is not going to take long for that cycle to achieve a critical mass that will result in even more specialization.

Where will you be when that happens? Are you getting ready for it? As I looked at the room full of participants in the latest round of code development I saw a lot of individuals that have devoted almost their entire professional life to the process. Then, every once in awhile, I would see a person that has that deer -in –the- headlights look setting in the audience. In conversing with some of them I have noted that many of them are full of enthusiasm for the process, but a little overwhelmed by it at the same time. They are usually the freshman class of attendees.

By the way, I am not criticizing them for that phenomenon. I am empathizing with them. Today, Code Development is a process that is intense and yet at the same very subtle. How do you get ready to be a player in that process? Where is the one class that you can take that is is qualifies you for being in the room? Well, there is an answer for that too. There are hundreds of classes you could take. There are hundreds of experiences that you could seek out to prepare you to be there to testify and advocate, but what is not there is a very good road map for preparation.

As I discuss this with Fire Marshal's around the country I have heard that we have a small problem that building officials do not have in playing in this process. Many of our Fire Marshal's are appointed from the ranks, and the job is a stepping stone to some other location in the organization. Not so with the Building officials. This is their career track. If they do move up and out it is into general city management.

The result is a more stable work group to participate in these processes. The faces and name do not change as much in their work group. Not that I am suggesting that gives them any more insight than what our contemporaries bring to the table, but it does have an impact on the process.

You could be saying, by now, "So what Coleman" What are we going to do about this? My answer is that I don't really know myself. This is one of those rare columns where I am expressing an observation, but I haven't figured this out either. I think we need to focus on the development of our personnel that are being asked to carry out these processes by giving them a lot more support than they get today. I think that we should be investing in their involvement in the process as deeply as can to avoid naïve responses to complex problems. I believe that we need to be developing even stronger mentoring relationships among the code warriors to better prepare our future replacements with a techniques to succeed in this complex world.

In the final analysis I guess, I have to admit that there are no simple answers, but I will guarantee that there will be consequences. Wanna help?