

Infrastructure in an emergency: Snap, crackle, pop

By Michael S. Williams

At Disneyland's Indiana Jones Adventure ride, you journey back to 1935 to the jungles of India's Lost Delta in search of unimaginable rewards. In the tropical garden at the entrance to the Temple of the Forbidden Eye, you are greeted by flickering overhead lights and the sound of a tired and overloaded generator as it attempts to feed the load. It is a great effect, but alas, we do not need to go to Disneyland to experience such effects; we have our own real ones right here in California.

For years now, hundreds, if not thousands of utility customers have experienced intermittent and unreliable power. Blackouts, brownouts and low voltage ("dirty power") have plagued some neighborhoods throughout sections of California. It depends on who you talk to as to what the real culprit is, but the lack of any type of positive customer relations by the utilities is blinding based on the complaints I have received. To be fair, there are many others who have had no problems whatsoever.

The electrical utilities are not alone; the telephone companies are failing too. To name a few issues: Intermittent service, cross connects, water on the lines, continued disrupted service, poor response time and poor customer relations. Once upon a time, the old Ma Bell series 500 desk set was almost indestructible. Prior to deregulation, the nation's phone system was profoundly robust. Today, if you drop your phone, it may be dispatched to the trash. "Can you hear me now?"

To complain is easy and in the case of the almost non-existent, so what, customer relations attitude, very justified. However, the enormous infrastructure of today's electrical and telecommunications systems are truly a wonderment. At times, it is amazing that it works at all.

I will leave the comments about poor customer service and the attitude that goes with it for the editorial pages. The objective of this article is address what are we as a community going to do about it? Make no mistake; the bitter truth is that much of California's infrastructure is failing, including electrical, telephone, cable, water distribution, and sewer systems.

Aside from our utilities, our national railway system is in need of serious repair and upgrades. The term rapid transit was quietly changed years ago to mass transit. It is truly amazing to look at the nation's rail system and how it works, when it works. The idea that masses of California workers are going to take to the rails is profoundly flawed. It will never happen until rail travel is reliable, consistent and on time. Interestingly, once upon a time it was.

In short, we have become extraordinarily dependant on our infrastructure. If it is failing during day-to-day use, what is it going to do during an emergency? On demand parts delivery for repairs will not work when the whole system crashes following an earthquake. How are the utility workers going to be called if the phones don't work? How are the two-way radio systems going to work if there is no power?

It is no secret that the California electrical grid is overloaded. Public works officials throughout the state are calling for huge budget increases to pay to replace aging plumbing for our water systems. Much of this plumbing was installed during World War II with sub-standard materials because of the war effort. It was not the best to start with. You can adapt to no power. No water is a different story.

The utilities are not alone. A drive on the freeway will realign the frontend of your vehicle. Tire wear, loss of vehicle control, damaged suspension systems are just but a few of the joys of driving today. Pot holes have replaced the famed Bott's Dots. Overweight vehicles, quick fixes, the mandated use of sub-standard contractors in the past, water damage, are some of the complex issues confronting today's road repair challenges.


What are we going to do about our failing infrastructure? Who is going to pay? How can we get the permitting process to even allow for

repairs and upgrades? What problems do we create when we do try to upgrade? How many self appointed groups and non-profits, homeowner associations, commissions, committees, governmental regulations and the threat of litigation by those who don't get their way stand in the way of just simple maintenance? These are big questions with no simple answers. However, from the eyes of emergency planning, if the system fails in good times, it will surely fail in bad.

Emergency power is a priority for any personal and business emergency and continuity plan. However, try to get a permit to install a generator. Wind energy sounds good, looks good on paper and has the politically correct ring to it, but good luck getting through an environmental impact study, local home owners association approval or obtaining a permit to construct anything large enough to work. Solar power has been around for decades, but it too is problematic in today's approval process. Moreover, the fire department can take exception to large solar panels on a roof. In the event of a fire, they are unable to properly ventilate a building. It also creates new hazards such as potentially high voltages to contend with. Moreover, there are people who do not like how they look. Today, it seems looks are more important than function or need. It is the same with dangerous trees whose looks are more important than the risks and liability they create for their owners and the public at large. Fuel breaks are perceived as ugly, never mind that they can stop the progression of a wildfire at no risk to firefighters or property owners.

For some, my comments may seem arrogant, smart, curt or condescending to one group or another. To others who have attempted to overcome the dependence on others, or attempted to better prepare for the enviable, I suspect they would agree with me. For many, the process is just too daunting so why bother? If CALTRANS were to close the freeway so they could actually fix the road, the phones in Sacramento would ring endlessly. For electrical utilities to do the necessary repairs, the public would scream because the power would have to be turned off for extended periods. If the telephone companies took the time to maintain their cables, particularly the hundreds of miles of trunk and fiber optic lines trapped in oak trees throughout the state, there would be groups upset and protesting about the trimming of trees. Clearly, in the eyes of those who make the decisions about maintenance, it appears that it is easier to let it all fall apart.

Then there is the issue of costs. Who is going to pay? Maintenance is expensive, time consuming and requires expertise. Within some organizations it is not even a priority. How many people even do simple maintenance on their own home and vehicles? If you don't take care of your car, it will not take care of you. In a sudden fire, a near empty tank of gas could cost you your life or block a road. Those bald tires will not serve you well in a storm. Those trees growing into your service drop will someday take out the power to your house.

Emergency planning and preparation is more than storing water, food and medications, it is protecting and maintaining our utilities and infrastructure. As a community, we need to overcome the obstacles and take serious and aggressive action to maintain these vital services. It starts with setting priorities. We also need the will to get it done. That old tired generator is about to give out. Are you ready? 

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