There are three issues to talk about this month—one good, one bad, and one that leads to a larger concern we have with infrastructure. Let’s start with the good news.

Conferences

2021 Virtual AWWA Annual Conference and Exposition

We found out a couple of months ago that the 2021 AWWA Annual Conference and Exposition (ACE) could not be held in San Diego for a variety of reasons, including the need to clean the facilities after use because of COVID-19. The conference, however, went on virtually and those who attended sessions were pretty happy with the results.

I conducted three training sessions for public officials on how water systems work, something I have done for 14 years, although usually we have three full afternoons versus the 80 minutes we did this year. It’s always interesting to hear comments from elected officials outside Florida, realizing that most of the time the attendees already buy into their systems’ needs and the management that needs to occur to maintain and operate the systems.

The other conference sessions and meetings were also virtual, and while we are all used to virtual meetings at this point, it’s a little hard to do four-day conferences this way. After canceling ACE in Orlando last year, it was good to have the conference back on track, if only virtually.

At the end of the conference, my longtime friend and colleague, Dr. Chi Ho Sham, became the president of AWWA for the 2021-22 year. Congratulations to him; the appointment is well deserved. He has been a very active member for over 20 years and has shown leadership all along the way, chairing a number of committees and divisions. He was our virtual guest last year for the Florida Section conference. I have always enjoyed serving with him.

The plan for ACE is to be fully live in San Antonio in June 2022. If you have never been, plan a trip. Remember the Alamo! (It’s way smaller than you expect.) The missions are a great side trip also.

2021 FSAWWA Fall Conference: Live and In Person!

This year the Florida Section AWWA conference will be live—that’s right—live! It’ll start the week after Thanksgiving as usual. Hit Orlando early—I will! Of course we will have public health in mind, so we will have all the notices about COVID protocols (social distancing, vaccines, and masks) as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in place, but we will be live! That feels so good to say.

This means we will have an exhibit hall, competitions, eight workshops on Monday, eight technical sessions all day Tuesday and four on Wednesday morning, the barbecue, and the Wednesday annual business meeting and awards luncheon.

And now-President Chi Ho Sham will be our in-person guest! While AWWA is not paying for officers to attend meetings, we have worked it out so he can escape the late November weather in Boston and enjoy some Florida Section hospitality and warm weather. We will have the only in-person planned officer visit to an AWWA section this year. Very cool.

The conference details are:

When: Nov. 28 to Dec. 2, 2021
Where: Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress Orlando

We’ve already sent the acceptance letters for papers for the technical program, which
were selected after reviewing over 80 abstracts. There will be lots of useful things to talk about, including potable reuse, lead in water, controlling disinfection byproducts, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), and how COVID changed our world. We will also have best paper winners for the 17th year in a row! We sold out the showroom floor, so we should have a full exhibit hall! And don’t forget: there will be lots of friends to meet, both new and old.

We are so looking forward to having the conference live and hope that you will be there! Make your reservations now! I did three months ago and rooms are going fast.

**COVID is Still With Us**

The only thing that might impact us is a not-so-old enemy—COVID-19 and the Delta variant. As I’m writing this on August 1, Florida is number one for all the wrong reasons. We set a new record for daily positive tests—over 20,000. We also set a record with over 11,000 people hospitalized with the Delta variant, with 96 percent of those unvaccinated.

The problem is that Florida has less than 50 percent of people vaccinated, and who knows about all the people visiting us. It seems like it’s those who are wearing masks and are vaccinated who are concerned about all those not wearing masks and often not vaccinated. The Delta variant is a more-easily transmitted form of COVID and the data indicate that those who are hospitalized are the unvaccinated, but those who are vaccinated can still get COVID—it just shouldn’t kill us.

We live in a society with other human beings, which means we have a responsibility to each other and to protect one another. So, let’s get vaccinated. Hopefully by the time you read this we have made lots of progress to that end and the rates of infection will have gone way down.

**Surfside Condominium Collapse: A Lesson for the Water Industry**

Finally, with respect to our responsibility to one another, we need to talk about the Surfside condo tragedy that happened here in late June. Half of a building collapsed on sleeping residents at 1:30 in the morning. Weeks were spent cleaning up the rubble, and unfortunately, digging out those who were crushed under the concrete. The last count was 98 dead. This is a very difficult moment for all of Florida, not just those directly affected.

Over the next year we will hear a lot about this—with lots of finger-pointing and lawsuits. Condo sales may slow down and values may drop due to uncertainty about building safety since the collapse. We all are affected, so let’s step back a minute and think about the parallels to what we in the utility industry face.

A condo association is made up of the owners of units in the building. They elect a board, which manages the building. For the most part the board is made up of people who are retired, with time on their hands, who generally know little about building infrastructure or the needs to maintain it. The condo association owns and is responsible for the infrastructure (walls and floors), but not the interior property. The board hires experts to evaluate many things, like legal services, engineering, and accounting, plus in some cases, employees and management.

In 2018, this condo association hired an engineer who found significant concerns with respect to structural damage to the building: the building was on the beach, the foundation was in salty groundwater; saltwater (tides) regularly entered the garage; the pool deck was flat, so water literally went through the concrete into the garage; construction on a building next door had been ongoing for a couple of years; the building was 40 years old and built to a different building code than required today, etc.

In addition, the residents did not vote to establish cash reserves (required by law). The cost estimate to fix the infrastructure was more than $15 million, which created an average assessment on each unit of $120,000. Each unit had a value of around $600,000 and many of the owners were on fixed incomes. There was no way for the condo association to force approval of the assessments and three years after the last report, none of the fixes had been done.

Does any of this sound familiar? Elected officials versus condo boards? Voting public versus voting residents? Deteriorating infrastructure? The parallels are a bit alarming considering that all of the issues that apply to the building apply to our water infrastructure (generally).

As I noted in an earlier column, before 1980, the United States spent 3.4 to 3.6 percent of its gross domestic product on infrastructure; that number was reduced to about 1.3 percent post-1980. No one wants to pay more in taxes or fees, so it’s no wonder that our infrastructure went from a B to a D grade from the American Society of Civil Engineers in 40 years. Failure of our infrastructure system risks lives and prosperity and it’s our job to do what we can to avoid further failure on our utility systems (and we do a great job of keeping things together despite the challenges, which may be part of the problem).

We need to make our case to management, elected officials, and the public. Hard, unpopular decisions will have to be made. An elected official once told me at an ACE that “there are no statues for those who did not raise taxes or fees” and he is correct. We remember those who build for the future.

The reality is that to maintain our infrastructure reliability, people will have to pay more and we need to help people understand that infrastructure investment equals jobs; therefore, our investments will keep people employed. No one builds a new factory or housing development where the water service is unreliable or the sewers do not work. Reliability is key.

The design, maintenance, and operation of water and sewer systems is a profession. Professions require advanced or specialized expertise that’s not commonly available in the public realm. Professions are assumed to meet the tests of public interest, whereby their actions are focused on the public good. Thomas Hobbes, the 17th-century English philosopher, would call this a social contract. Our industry is a social contract with our customers that’s also enacted into law—our purpose is to protect the public health, safety, and welfare.

Despite the challenges, we need to use the example of what went wrong in Surfside to help educate our leaders and customers about what could go wrong if investments are not made in the water industry. It’s part of our professional and ethical responsibility.