

## Passed and Signed

May 12, 2008

### Legislative Session

Monday, April 14, had been a long day. Executive Director, Sam Johnson, was still on the road at 6:30 p.m., thinking about what he had left undone when his cell phone got his attention.

His friend, Senator Billy Thames, had called with news that was sure to make Sam's day. Senator Thames is the lobbyist hired by the Mississippi State Damage Prevention Program Committee (MSDPPC) to work with the legislature on a proposed amendment to the current damage prevention law. Sam listened to the senator tell him that the damage prevention initiative had just passed both House and Senate overwhelmingly. He at once felt a sense of relief and a greater sense of gratitude for his Board's support of the project, but also for those stakeholders who in the past might have taken a different position.

When the call ended, his thoughts drifted back to the formation of the MSDPPC. The idea was to bring a diverse group together to explore the statewide impact of the PIPES Act of 2006 passed by the U.S. Congress. It was determined that the best first step toward a stronger and more consistent damage prevention program in Mississippi was to require all owners/operators of underground facilities to be a member of Mississippi One-Call. Recognizing that such a proposal might be met with mixed emotions, it was further determined to invite representatives of the various statewide associations to discuss the issue in an open forum. Would it be possible to put aside past differences to create a single piece of legislation that promoted membership in Mississippi One-Call?

The MSDPPC brought the stakeholders together September 6, 2007, in Jackson to gauge the interest in strengthening the damage prevention law. Jay Street, Chairman of the Committee, presented details of the proposed amendment to more than 50 representatives from both members and nonmembers of the One-Call system. The overwhelming consensus of the group was that the proposed amendment was the right thing to do. It was suggested that perhaps the Committee could request to meet personally with the associations who in the past could not support such proposals. Recognizing the importance of such meetings John McDill, Vice Chairman of the Committee along with Jay Street volunteered to speak on behalf of the proposed amendment. The purpose of the meetings was to determine the associations' official position should the amendment be introduced in the upcoming legislative general session.

Sam further remembered the willingness of the associations to listen attentively to the Committee's proposal. The almost unanimous response coming out of these meetings was, "I don't see a compelling reason to oppose your position." The cooperation was encouraging enough to the MSDPPC that they decided to take it to the next level.

The Committee then made the recommendation to the Mississippi One-Call Board to support requiring all owners/operators of underground facilities in Mississippi to be a member of the One-Call system. The next step was to hire Senator Billy Thames to lobby for the passage of the proposal in the next general session.

The Board agreed with the Committee's recommendation and so began the official quest to strengthen the current law. When asked about the upcoming challenge of working on the bill, the senator quietly replied, "I've always enjoyed working on issues that I really believed in, and I believe in Mississippi One-Call. Their existence promotes safety for the excavator as well as for the general public. In a way, I'm working for the same folks I've worked for all my life." And with that, Senator Thames took the proposed amendment and his 28 years of experience as a state senator and went to work.

Senator Thames met with both House and Senate leaders to discuss the proposal and seek direction for moving forward. Initially, a version of the proposal was introduced in both House and Senate.

Ultimately, HB1215 introduced by Representative Tyrone Ellis passed in the House by a vote of 116 – 2 and was adopted by the Senate unanimously.

That's why Sam's cell phone was ringing late that Monday afternoon. Good news is to be shared immediately, and it was not only good news for Sam Johnson, Mississippi One-Call, and the MSDPPC, but also for the excavators who call Mississippi One-Call with intent to dig. Now the caller could be assured that all the owners/operators of underground facilities would be notified in a timely fashion. Now the system could work as it was intended to work - with just one call.

The next morning after hearing that the bill had passed, someone suggested that Sam might want to take a few days off. He just smiled. Sam knew that passing the bill was just the alarm clock, and now it was time to go to work.