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PW SOLUTIONS:



RoadWorks

PAGES 38-54

Plowing ahead

What it takes
to retire into
consulting
page 32

Former public works employees
Diane Watkins (left) and Diana
Clonch launch second careers.

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Plowing ahead

CDLs in hand, these two retirees are putting their hard-won expertise to work as public works consultants.

To hear them tell it, they were just doing their jobs. But for three decades, Diana Clonch and Diane Watkins have been public works pioneers on the front line and behind the desk. Now, having embarked on a well-earned retirement, the Ohio residents find that life after public works is ... well, still public works.

Today, Clonch and Watkins consult for the public works sector in different capacities, often working together. Why remain in the trenches after a fulfilling 30-year career?

"The work is so diverse, you never know what you'll encounter each day," says Watkins. "I'd come to work with a whole agenda planned and everything would change the minute I hit the door. That's when the adrenaline kicks in and you accomplish things that almost seem impossible once you get them done and look back."

Clonch started her career as an engineering technician at the county level and worked her way up to a managerial role with the Ohio DOT (ODOT). Watkins joined the City of Cincinna-

ti as a payroll clerk and retired from there as a division superintendent. After they met at a snow conference about 10 years ago, their paths often crossed and a friendship developed. Currently, they both serve on the board and the planning committee for the Ohio chapter of the American Public Works Association (APWA).

Path to consulting

Upon earning her associate degree in civil engineering, Clonch joined the Engineer's Office of Franklin County in 1983. A promotion in 1995 made her the county's first female department head in public works and the first female highway superintendent in the state's 88 counties.

She later transferred to the City of Columbus as street maintenance operations manager, responsible for more than 5,000 lane miles and a staff of 200. She finished her career at ODOT as snow and ice coordinator, maintenance administrator, and inspector, and retired in 2012. Ohio government employees receive full retirement benefits after 30 years, and that time is transferable be-

tween state and local agencies.

Clonch can't put her finger on exactly when she decided to become a consultant, but several factors came together to lead her to that path. One was having worked with consultants. "I began to realize there was a need for special services in the area of winter operations, the single most expensive maintenance category for agencies in the Snow Belt," Clonch says.

Another need she identified was formal training for her front line employees promoted to supervisory roles. "Good training was hard to find, so I started to develop it myself," she says. She enjoyed this role and considered it a service she could provide.

Clonch earned her MBA from Mount Vernon Nazarene University, Mt. Vernon, Ohio, in 2009 and part of her coursework was a project on launching a business. She drew on that learning experience to put the pieces in place for her own venture as she approached retirement. She retained an attorney, established DW Clonch LLC (www.dw-clonch.com), and designed a logo.

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Diane Watkins (left) and Diana Clonch are public works pioneers on the front line and behind the desk.
Photo: Eric Wagner

SNOW ANGELS TO THE RESCUE

Helping public works departments streamline snow and ice control will keep consultants Diana Clonch and Diane Watkins in snow boots for years.

"No single activity is more expensive, or more visible to the public," says Clonch.

In fact, winter operations can consume 25% to 45% of maintenance budgets. Factor in the season's unpredictability and all bets are off.

Budgets were blown in 2013-14, when the Midwest and Great Lakes regions endured 25 storms with record or near-record snowfall, cold temperatures, and ice cover. Road crews across the Snow Belt burned through salt stockpiles and dipped into this season's supplies. District 1 of the Ohio DOT (ODOT), an eight-county region, spent \$8.7 million on snow and ice control, more than twice an average year.

Not wanting to be caught short again, agencies increased volume requirements when they put out salt contracts for this season. But supplies were exhausted, vendors couldn't meet requests, and it was nearly impossible (or cost-prohibitive) to find bidders.

For example, Jefferson County, Ill., used 1,200 tons of salt in 2013-14, all but 50 tons of its stockpile. The agency contacted dozens of suppliers to rebuild reserves to 600 tons. A source was finally found but, at \$117 per ton, costs had almost doubled from the previous year. Salt prices in the Midwest were as high as \$140 per ton.

Clonch sometimes helps clients revise contract language to be more flexible about quantities, price, and delivery timeframes. But a key part of the solution is to add other deicers and approaches to your arsenal.

"Typically, we plow, throw rock salt until we have no more, and only then do we look for an alternative," she says.

The past year's supply-and-demand situation gave many agencies an incentive to start implementing that approach.

This year, ODOT's District 1 used 62,300 tons of salt and 460,000 gallons of salt brine. This winter was less extreme, so salt usage was about half of last year's levels. Interesting, however, was an increase in the proportion and variety of alternatives. This year's mix included 645,000 gallons of deicing liquid — not only salt brine but also beet juice and natural saltwater.

While not new, alternatives sometimes still meet with resistance.

"It's different than the age-old approach of using solids, and most of us have a bit of a challenge with change," she says. And safety and liability are always concerns when experimenting with a different product. "But an enormous amount of data from research and practical application strongly supports the use of liquids and the benefit to winter operations."

It helps to hear success stories. "As a sales rep, I can go in and talk about the results we experienced in Cincinnati," says Watkins.

For example, Maintenance Supervisor Bryan Pickworth invited Watkins to review the Farmington Hills, Mich., snow and ice control plan with his road crew and maintenance staff. "She brings a fresh perspective and helps them understand deicing with liquids," he says.

"The largest deterrent in the use of liquids is the lack of understanding of how the products work and how to use them," says Clonch.

That's where training comes in. Clonch conducts 15 or 20 winter operations sessions every season, and last year guided 1,200 students through the decision making process, encompassing:

- **Objective**—e.g., bare pavement, one passable lane, access to major traffic generators
- **Resources**—Labor (full- or part-time, seasonal, contract), fleet (size, type, age, condition, technology), materials (salt, liquids, other chemicals, application rates, and methods)
- **Integrating these factors** with each season's unique parameters—microclimate, changes in roadways, available resources.

What it comes down to, says Clonch, is "What are you trying to do and what do you have to work with?"

Another step Clonch took was to obtain Small Business Enterprise (SBE) status with the City of Cincinnati as well as SBE and Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) status through the federal government's System for Award Management (SAM). This opens opportunities for working with municipalities that have incentives to contract with such firms and helped her land a contract with Cincinnati.

She has also applied for Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) certification through the State of Ohio. DBE is a U.S. DOT program with certification processed at the state level and, once issued, applicable across state boundaries and recognized at the federal level. "That will enable me to partner with someone in another part of the country and help them take advantage of procurement initiatives," she explains.

Although Clonch didn't have work lined up when she hung out her shingle, she had identified a list of agencies that had a potential need and sent out proposals. The first round came up empty, but she soon landed her first contract for a private condominium complex to review and evaluate their pavements and provide recommendations.

Today, Clonch's clients range from large cities such as Cincinnati and Dayton to small townships. In the private sector, she has provided services for small local businesses and some of the area's largest snow removal contractors. Most of her clients are in Ohio, but her reach extends from Pennsylvania to Missouri and is expanding. Her work mix includes many smaller seasonal projects and a solid foundation of repeat business, and she offers services in several areas:

- **Evaluating operations.** Reviewing and evaluating existing processes and policies with an eye to implementing best practices and new technology.
- **Contract development.** Administering contracts; creating win-win

language. For example, Clonch developed a \$1.3 million contract, including estimated quantities and specification details, for a maintenance repair and resurfacing project covering 17 miles of streets. When working with private clients, she focuses on contract interpretation, understanding performance requirements, and fulfilling contract obligations.

- **Training.** Winter maintenance training for all levels of responsibility, from management to operators (see sidebar on page 34).

As business grew, Clonch decided it was time to seek a teammate. She turned to her colleague and good friend, Diane Watkins, who had retired a year earlier. Watkins came on board as an independent contractor, bringing her own history of complementary experience.

In and out of the trenches

Watkins recalls that when she started with the City of Cincinnati in 1980 as a payroll clerk, "I listened to the guys coming in from the field and got interested in what they were doing."

She soon moved out of that entry-level position to work on paving crews and behind the wheel of a snow plow. As the city's first female inspector, she inspected contracted work on roads and later was promoted to foreman — again, the first woman. When she retired in 2011, Watkins was superintendent of the traffic and roads division, managing a staff of 150 and a \$12 million budget.

In addition to business management coursework at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, Watkins completed a two-year management program with the City of Cincinnati. She also earned her Automotive Fleet Manager certification from the National Association of Fleet Administrators.

"It was never my lifelong dream to be a division manager. I'm more of a fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants person," Watkins explains. "I was happy with each promotion and when the next opportunity came along, I had gained the confidence



Diana Clonch (left) and Diane Watkins help public works officials meet the challenges of winter operations. No activity is more expensive and more visible to the public than snow and ice control, says Clonch. Photo: DW Clonch LLC

that I could do it."

Her diverse field experience served her well when, as operations supervisor, she was charged with a special project to determine community priorities and customize the city's public works workforce to do that work.

"We set up a program of regular contact with community leaders to bring them into the decision-making process for how we'd work in their areas," Watkins explains. "Different communities had different needs and there's never enough money."

A key to the solution was to add a small overnight shift of cross-trained employees to tackle individual communities' specific needs. Unions were represented on the planning committee to

build support for the concept and to integrate the added work shift and necessary cross-training.

"The employees were instrumental in convincing the union that we weren't trying to take anything away, but rather to give them more skills and job satisfaction," says Watkins.

It took two years of planning and a year of implementation, but the division restructuring improved work productivity, employee job satisfaction, and customer service.

"We were operating like little agencies in 10 neighborhoods," says Watkins. "We had a lot of feedback from citizens that it was about time we asked them what's important to them." Watkins received

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an award from the city's director of public services, recognizing the special effort she put into the program.

Watkins might have stayed longer in her job, but when impending changes to the city's retirement program were announced she decided to retire under the existing plan. Soon after, she accepted an independent contract position with Road Solutions Inc. (RSI) as regional sales consultant. While with Cincinnati she had worked with RSI, an Indianapolis-based supplier of agricultural-based deicing products such as beet juice, on expanding the city's use of organic products in snow and ice control.

"I had a good relationship with people in the company," she says. "They didn't just sell a product. If I needed something at 9 on a Saturday night, they were there to answer my questions."

Watkins tackled her new role knowing that operations decision makers look for

field results that support product claims, so it is important to collaborate with these customers. RSI had recently taken on a chloride-free liquid deicing product and asked several municipalities to test the product under different weather and road conditions.

"At that time most agencies that used liquids were using them for anti-icing and to prewet salt," Watkins explains. "The purpose of this study was to gather performance information on liquids when used on snow and ice already on roadways."

One of the participating agencies was the City of Farmington Hills, Mich., which had won an APWA Excellence in Snow and Ice Control Award for its proactive anti-icing program. "Diane was actively involved with the direct liquid application study," says Bryan Pickworth, maintenance supervisor for the city's Division of Public Works, who presented

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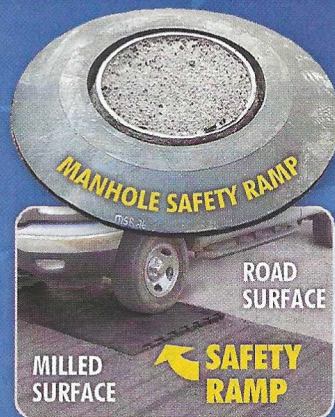


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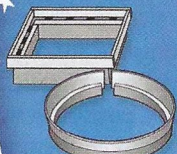
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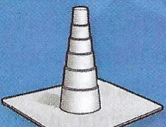
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the findings at the 2013 APWA Snow Conference.

Networking

A benefit of collaborative efforts such as the field study is it connects people from different agencies and organizations.

"Networking is one of most valuable tools I have," says Pickworth, who maintains contact with both Watkins and Clonch and has worked with them on APWA conferences and other projects. "We call each other to bounce ideas. Since they work with contractors a lot, I learn what works and what doesn't."

Clonch and Watkins agree that networking has been an indispensable resource for their own success.

"I stay involved with professional organizations, trade shows, and research, and when I see folks doing new things, I reach out," says Clonch. "I can build my own knowledge base and pass it along."

Public works professionals have a wealth of insights to share. "They're creative because they're given tasks without enough resources," Watkins says.

Unfortunately, that same lack of resources allows little time to network. "One thing I can do by spending time in the field is putting people together who might not otherwise have met."

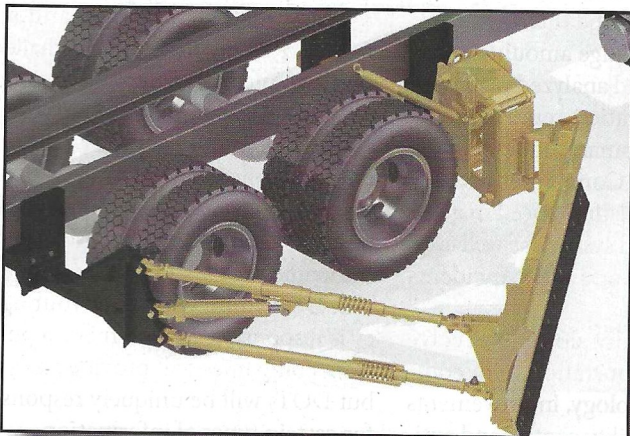
Watkins believes that as a public works retiree she has a calling "to go back and support the people who are trying to do what we did under much more difficult circumstances," given today's budgetary and political constraints. "It's rewarding to work on a team in the community every day to provide safety and sustainability, take care of infrastructure, and improve the quality of life." **PW**

Diana Granitto is a freelance writer based in suburban Chicago. E-mail dgranitto@msn.com.

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