

# APWA Global Solutions Fact Finding Trip to Haiti

by Carl Quiram, PE, PWLF

As someone who is active with the American Public Works Association (APWA) national, I was not the least bit surprised when I got a call from the president, George Crombie, asking me to get involved in a project. I had no idea, however, that the project would forever change my outlook on life and the perception with which I view the world. In 2011, under George's leadership, APWA began a new initiative called Global Solutions. The goal of Global Solutions is to provide an international exchange forum promoting leading edge best practices in public works worldwide. Global Solutions also strives to provide outreach to educate and share knowledge with underdeveloped countries. George was asking me to take part in a Global Solutions Fact Finding trip to Haiti to see if there was anything that APWA could do to assist the country that is still ravaged by the earthquake that hit the Port-au-Prince area in January 2010.



Waste in streets next to food market

I had heard that Haiti was an extremely poor nation. I also knew that the conditions were bad before the earthquake and could not imagine what I would find after the earthquake. Haiti is located about 60 miles east of Cuba, just off the Florida coast. It is about the size of Maryland and is home to about 9.9 million inhabitants. Four out of five Haitians live in poverty, more than half in abject poverty; the per capita GDP is just over 700 US dollars per year. In Haiti, unemployment exceeds 80%, the adult illiteracy rate is 56%, and the life expectancy of a Haitian male is only 59

years old. To say the least - conditions are bad.

Haiti has many problems. It has been a bed of political instability since it gained its independence from France in 1803. From 1843 to 1915, Haiti experienced twenty-two changes in government. What few natural resources Haiti had have been depleted. The island nation has been largely depleted of forest to make charcoal to cook with. As you look down the valley you can see the haze of the charcoal smoke at all times of day. There is virtually no infrastructure to speak of, and the remnants of the earthquake are seen everywhere you look. The graft and corruption are obvious impediments to progress. The extreme spread between the "haves" (Bourgeois) and the "have nots" is immense.

As you travel around Port-au-Prince as a public works official, you get to see first-hand how our profession improves the quality of life for our residents. In the morning, sewage flows down the ditch lines within feet of the fruit and vegetables that people are selling in the sidewalk markets that are everywhere. Because the sidewalks are crammed with people and wares trying to scrape out enough money to survive, pedestrians are forced to walk in the streets. Traffic control is non-existent. The driver with the biggest vehicle and loudest horn has the right of way through the traffic that at times is five lanes of traffic vying for the two lanes that are actually available, all the while dodging pedestrians, motorcycles, and bicycles. Chaos cannot begin to describe what it is like. Layer that with the presence of trash, smog, and dust everywhere and you have a picture of what life without public works would be like.

The government officials that we met with are in a hopeless situation. There are absolutely no resources to work with. Many countries have pledged support to help Haiti. However, few are sending the money until control is gained over the corruption. Even the Haitian public works officials cannot get donated equipment through the ports. Land ownership is questionable,





*Unregulated streets*

making the generation of revenue through taxation difficult. Even if land ownership could be sorted out, few would have the resources to actually pay their taxes. Many squatters just build a house wherever they find an open spot and illegally tie into the electrical system, making power distribution very unreliable.

Those of you that know me know how I constantly strive to put public works on a level playing field with police and fire in emergency response. That being said, however, one of the things that I took away from Haiti was this: until there is a police presence that can establish law and order, it will be very difficult for public works to do its job. We came across a job where public

works was trying to repave an intersection. The sidewalk vendors were still there, people and cars were moving through the hot asphalt at the same time the rollers were trying to compact it in place. It was chaos. I asked why they didn't close the road to get the job done right and the reply was, "The people would just revolt if we did that."

On a positive note, the Haitians that I did come into contact with were very warm and welcoming. It was unsettling for me to think that I probably had more cash in my pocket than the people that were taking care of me would make in a month. We attended a church service while we were there that will change my life forever. I could not understand a word of the sermon but what did affect me was the strength, character, pride, and community that was evident within the walls of the church. Everyone in the church was nicely dressed, clean, and smiling. If you had not experienced the conditions outside the church firsthand, you would have no idea that these folks struggled on a daily basis just to provide basic necessities to survive.

*APWA is currently working on a white paper reviewing our recommendations from our trip. No solution will be easy, but we did come up with a few ways that we could definitely help. I will keep you posted as the APWA International Affairs Committee and Board of Directors weigh our recommendations.*



*Lack of waste management makes conditions unsanitary*