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February 23, 2023



A CASE STUDY

- Contel of Indiana, Inc. v. Lee Coulson, Beverly Coulson and Zoe Coulson
 - 659 N.E.2d 224, 1995 Ind. App. LEXIS 1643 (Ind. App. 1995)
 - Rights of Way and Utilities



FACTUAL BACKGROUND

- SR 63 in Sullivan County, formerly a County Road, the State assumed jurisdiction and maintenance
- Coulson's property extended to the center of the County Road, now SR 63, subject to an easement in favor of the public for the use of the ROW.
 - no public easement or ROW was ever conveyed to the County or State
 - the County or State never obtained the ROW by fee conveyance or condemnation.
- No dispute on the existing easement.
- State occasionally entered the Coulson's land adjacent to the paved portion of the ROW to mow and maintain the shoulder and side ditch area.

FACTUAL BACKGROUND – CONT.

- Coulson's installed a fence between the highway and their crop line. The width or depth of this area is not clear.
- Contel, a telecommunications company, had previously installed or assumed control over underground local telephone lines in this “gap” area.
- Contel applied and received a permit from INDOT, limited to the State's ROW, to install long distance telephone fiber optic cable.
- Contel trenched and buried approximately two and one-half miles of fiber optic long distance telephone cable along SR 63, including in this “gap” area on Coulson's property.
- It is not clear from the Court's opinion, but it appears Coulson had notified Contel that Contel was working on Coulson's property and that they had no right to do so.

AERIAL VIEW OF SR 63



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PROCEDURAL POSTURE

- Coulson filed a trespass action against Contel.
- Cross-Motions for Partial SJ - the width of the State's ROW:
 - Does the ROW include any area beyond the travelled portion of SR 63.
- T. Ct. granted partial SJ in favor of Coulson:
 - the State's ROW does not extend beyond the traveled portion of SR 63.
- No just reason for delay, and entered a final judgment on this issue, leading to the appeal.



ISSUE 1:

How to establish the width of the ROW when not conveyed or condemned. The Court discussed and relied on the following cases:

Extent of Public Use:

Anderson v. City of Huntington (1907), 40 Ind. App. 130, 81 N.E. 223.

When there is no evidence of a fee, easement or condemnation to establish a road ROW, the existence and width of that ROW is established by the public's use.

“Where the boundary lines of a road have never been established by any competent authority, but the right of the public to travel over such road has been established by continuous usage, the width of such road is determined by the width of such use.”

Id. At 133, 81 N.E. at 224.



Bd. of Commissioners of Monroe County v. Hatton (1981, Ind. App.), 427 N.E.2d 696.

Does not include Berm or Shoulder

- The established traveled portion does not include any berm or shoulder area adjacent to the road.
- In Hatton, the plaintiff attempted to establish County responsibility for maintenance of the land adjacent to the traveled portion of the road in order to establish liability for the County's failure to maintain.
- There was no evidence of any conveyance to the County of a fee or easement, the extent of the County's responsibility was found to be limited to the traveled portion of the road.



Elder v. Bd. of Commissioners of Clark County (1986, Ind. App.), 490 N.E.2d 362 trans. denied.

Inverse condemnation action -

Clark County attempted to extend the width of the ROW from 20 feet to 40 feet.

- Removed trees, etc. within the 40 feet desired extension.
- Nothing in the public record that would have included in the landowner's historical land abstract to put the landowner on notice of the County's claim to a 40 foot right of way.
- The court found the ROW was limited to the established traveled portion, which was 20 feet.



RELEVANT FACTORS:

- The following factors were relevant in the Court's decision to limit SR 63 to the traveled portions of the road:
 - No evidence that the public ever traveled over any portion of the highway other than the paved portion;
 - Neither the County nor the State acquired a right to any property adjacent to the traveled road by conveyance or condemnation, or by use;
 - The State never placed any markers on Coulson's land to indicate the State claimed any of Coulson's land other than the paved portion;
 - The State's permit to Contel was limited to the State's ROW, without any indication of the width of the ROW.



A PUBLIC UTILITY ?????

Contel argued that Contel, as a public utility, is entitled to install public utility facilities adjacent to a public road.

Ritz v. Indiana and Ohio R.R. (1994, Ind. App.), 632 N.E.2d 769.

- *Where a fee is already subject to an easement for highway purposes, a utility may use a public right-of-way without the consent of the servient landowner who claims that such utility work is an additional burden on the fee.*
- Id., 632 N.E.2d at 775.



All cases cited by Contel in support of this argument recognized the utility's right to use the ROW, but not beyond the ROW.

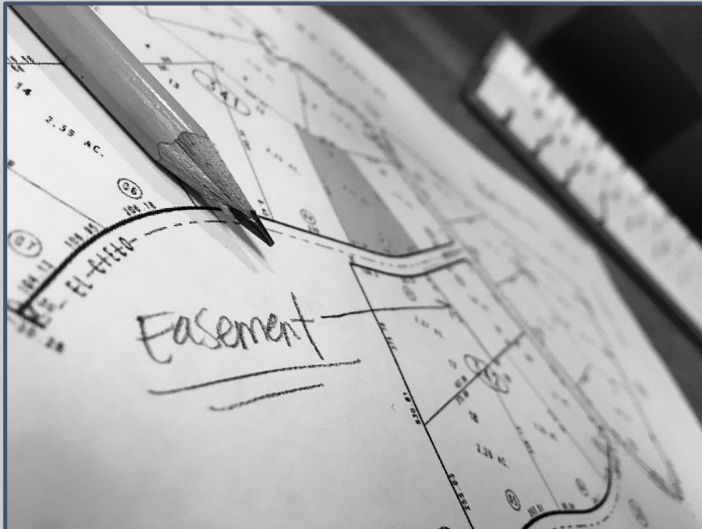
In Ritz, the Court found the State's ROW was limited to the traveled portion of the road and did not extend to the adjoining land.

Based on the facts of this case, the Court rejected Contel's argument, and limited the ROW to the travelled portion of the road.



EASEMENT VS. LICENSE

Contel argued that Coulson failed to object to the State's maintenance and mowing of the area adjacent to the traveled portion of the road, i.e., the shoulder.



Contel argued that Coulson had recognized the State's right to access the adjacent area and established an easement beyond the roadway.

Industrial Disposal v. City of East Chicago (1980, Ind. App.), 407 N.E.2d 1203.

The Court responded that the State's right to enter upon Coulson's land was in the nature of an implied license resulting from the State's authority and responsibility to maintain the public road:

- to mow and maintain the side ditches and culverts.

This authority comes from an implied license, not from an easement.

The nature and limits of an implied license and the differences of an implied license from an easement:

- “. . . [U]se of land under a mere license cannot ripen into an easement, regardless of how long that use is continued. (Citation omitted). The occasional, intermittent entry by the State on the property adjacent to the roadway merely to maintain areas appurtenant to the roadway did not establish a public right-of-way in those areas.”

Contel v. Coulson, 659 N.E.2d at 228.



ISSUE 2:

Prescriptive Easement –

Did Contel, or its predecessors, acquire a prescriptive easement for the area beyond the traveled portion of the road by the prior existence of the local telephone lines?

- Prior continued use for local telephone lines
- With the knowledge and acquiescence of the adjoining landowners



Prescriptive Easement – Cont.

- Coulson did not object to the existence of the local telephone lines
- Coulson did object to the long distance fiber optic cable
 - local telephone lines are not the same as the new fiber optic long distance line
- The Court refused to draw this distinction. There was no evidence in the record to allow the Court to determine if a prescriptive easement existed due to the presence of the telephone lines providing local service.



DECISION

The Court found no State easement or right-of-way beyond the traveled portion of SR 63 and upheld the trial court's decision on the partial summary judgment. However, the Court remanded the case for a determination on the prescriptive easement issue.



TAKE-A-WAYS:

Determination of the width of a right-of-way and rights of utility.

Considerations:



TAKE-A-WAYS:

1. DOCUMENTS OF RECORD

- A specific grant of the right-of-way or an easement,
- Historical records that establish the right-of-way
 - County Commissioner records creating the road.
- Must appear in the abstract of the specific land to put the landowner on notice of the existence of the width of the right-of-way.
- See the following discussion of WorldCom. The utility will have the right to occupy the ROW for public utility purposes.



TAKE-A-WAYS:

2. WIDTH OF USE

- Establishes the width of the right-of-way,
- includes an implied license to maintain the shoulder or side ditches.

The shoulder and side ditches are not part of the ROW and may not be occupied by a utility solely on the basis of the ROW.



TAKE-A-WAYS:

3. PRESCRIPTIVE EASEMENT

- an existing use that meets the elements of a prescriptive easement may establish the right of a utility to add to its existing use of the area adjacent to a ROW.



SUBSEQUENT CASES

WorldCom Network Services v. Thompson (1998 Ind. App.), 698 N.E.2d 1233.

- In WorldCom, the dispute involved the laying of buried communication cable adjacent to Baltimore Road in Morgan County and the appropriate width of the road. The landowner, Thompson, disputed the width of the road and assumed self-help and cut the cable. The road had been established by a Commissioner's Order in 1913, arguably under the 1905 Highway Act (IC 8-20-1-1 to 8-20-1-72) ("Act"). The Order was filed in the Commissioner's records with the Auditor. The Act required the Order to be entered of record. One dispute involved the meaning of "of record". The Court determined that "**of record**" did not reference the records of the County Recorder, but the records of the Auditor. Therefore, the Order, having been adopted under the 1905 Highway Act and filed in the records of the Auditor, established the width of the road as 30 feet.
- This finding falls under the first take-a-way of the Contel decision –
 - DOCUMENTS OF RECORD.



WORLD COM – CONT.

- The second issue addressed in WorldCom concerned the actual location of the road. The Commissioner's Order described the center line of the road and the Court determined that the described center line followed the section line at the point of dispute, which happened to be one of the boundary lines of Thompson's property. Therefore, the right-of-way extended 15' on either side of this center line, and 15' onto Thompson's property.
- The case was remanded because the construction of Baltimore Road was postponed, and the record was not clear if the road was ultimately constructed under the 1913 Ordinance or subsequently established by public use.



Ostler v. Level 3 Communications., Inc. (2002 S.D. Ind), 2002 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 17366, 2002 WL 31040337. (Unpublished Opinion)

- In Ostler, an opinion marked “*not for publication*”, the plaintiff attempted to certify a class based on ownership of 465 miles of property on which Level 3 had buried a communications cable adjacent to a ROW. Citing Contel, the Court refused to certify the class because each individual landowner would have to establish their individual ownership rights with respect to their property and the method by which the adjacent ROW was established.
- “*Because each of the property owners' claims requires an individualized determination of the owner's rights and Level 3's rights with respect to the particular parcel of land at issue, common questions do not predominate. The proposed class cannot be certified under Rule 23(b)(3).*”
- Id., pg. 10.



CONCLUSION:

- When working with a utility seeking to install a utility in a public right-of-way without an adjoining property owner's consent, the utility is limited to the right-of-way, whether it is established by a conveyance of fee or easement, condemnation, or public use. The precise location of that right-of-way is determined by how the right-of-way was established. If established by public use, it is limited to the traveled portion of the road, with a license to maintain the side berm and ditches.



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