

Partnering on large municipal infrastructure projects

As municipalities across Canada struggle with aging infrastructure, the next decade will see an increased focus on replacing bridges, roads, water treatment facilities, and just about anything built from concrete and steel. As this infrastructure boom continues, Canadian municipal leaders should look to partnering processes to improve the efficient use of public funds and reduce litigation during and following construction.

What is partnering?

Partnering is a non-binding management approach to public construction projects that brings construction partners together prior to the beginning of construction to review the project and develop strategies to encourage teamwork and open communications.

The Utah Department of Transportation & Utah Association of General Contractors Partnering Field Guide (July 2010) is one of the best documents available and describes partnering as follows:

Partnering is a way of conducting business in which two or more organizations make long-term commitments to achieve mutual goals. This requires team-based relationships utilizing open communications among the participants based on trust, understanding, and teamwork.

Partnering is a relationship in which:

- *Trust and open communications are encouraged and expected from all participants.*
- *All parties address and resolve issues and problems promptly*

and at the lowest possible level. They strive to develop solutions that are agreeable and meet the needs of everyone involved (win-win approach).

- *All parties have identified common goals for the partnership and at the same time are aware of and respect each other's individual goals and values.*
- *Partners seek input from each other in an effort to find better solutions to the problems and issues at hand. This creates synergy in the relationship that fosters cooperation and improves the productivity of the partnership.*

Partnering began in the United States as a way to bring more efficiency to public construction projects and reduce costly litigation. This partnering process has now been adopted by many forward-thinking Canadian municipalities.

Why use partnering?

The main premise of partnering is simple. By bringing together key personnel prior to construction, you have the opportunity to team-build, learn about the strengths of the construction partners, and (most importantly), review the project in advance of construction to identify potential problems and develop solutions. Partnering forces all participants to think hard about what can go wrong during a project and develop responses and strategies

to deal with these problems before they happen. By doing this, less time is lost on the construction site, since strategies have already been determined and key personnel selected to deal with these issues. The results of an effective partnering agreement should be fewer delays during construction, less litigation, a safer project, claims mitigated and resolved quickly, and a better infrastructure product at the end.

What does the municipality need to do?

Typically, in most municipalities that decide to use partnering, the requirement to use partnering is written into the Request for Proposal (RFP) documents for the project. This ensures that all participants are aware of the need to carry a budget for partnering, and everyone is aware that the project will be driven by the partnering approach.

Once the contract is awarded, an initial partnering session should be hosted by the municipality. The municipality can do this itself, or hire a facilitator to do it. While either approach will work, using a third-party facilitator allows the municipality to focus on outcomes, rather than the mechanics of organizing and



HOWARD WILLIAMSON is the President of Williamson Consulting Inc., a public relations and communications firm that specializes in partnering processes associated with large municipal infrastructure projects. He can be reached at <howard@williamson-consulting.ca> or 613-590-7880.

recording the decisions from the meeting. Following the initial partnering meeting, regular follow-up meetings should take place throughout the construction phase to ensure that the principles of partnering are being used on the site.

The most important thing that the municipality can do is make it clear to everyone that the municipality is totally committed to the partnering process and the principles of partnering. Without this complete buy-in from the municipality, the process risks becoming unproductive once the partners realize the municipality is not committed, and will not challenge the construction partners to live up to their commitments made during the initial partnering session.

What happens at the partnering session?

Partnering sessions can take one or more days, depending on the complexity of the construction project and whether or not the construction contractors and project engineers have previously worked together.

Partnering sessions begin with commitment statements from the partners, including the municipality's project manager, the project engineers, and construction engineers. This is important to set the tone for the meeting and show total commitment among the key participants on the project.

Following the initial statements, the participants split into their respective organizations and begin listing needs and expectations on the project. This exercise ensures that all the participants understand their role in the project and what the other participants expect from them. It is a way of validating expectations prior to construction. During this session, any problems that arise regarding roles and expectations should be resolved to the satisfaction of all participants.

Following this review, the participants then focus on the challenges and obstacles that could arise during construction. This session is critical to the project, since it examines all the issues and problems that could harm the project. Challenges such as labour disruptions, contract disputes, weather concerns, systems challenges, and design

constraints are all obstacles that can be found on infrastructure projects. Once all the potential obstacles are listed, the entire group goes through a prioritization process to identify the top 10 or 15. This process is important to remove the obstacles listed, but not considered important.

At this point, the facilitator will usually outline the principles of partnering and conflict resolution for the entire group before the teams are tasked with finding solutions to the top challenges.

Once the principles of partnering are presented, the teams are mixed so that different disciplines are at each discussion area. Once the teams are mixed, each team is tasked with developing strategies to deal with an identified obstacle. Presentations follow, with the whole group agreeing on key strategies and tactics for each identified challenge. What is essentially being developed is a roadmap to get everyone from the initial construction phase to start-up or completion with the fewest lingering problems and, hopefully, little or no litigation.

Escalation ladder and partnering charter

One of the key elements for an effective partnering project is the development of an escalation ladder. This ladder outlines who will be responsible in each organization should an obstacle arise; and, if not resolved, who will deal with it next. One of the key principles of partnering is an agreement – on the part of all participants – to endeavour to solve problems quickly and at the lowest possible level, without having to escalate the problem. In other words, if two foremen on the site are able to solve a problem that has developed, that is the end of it. There is no need to discuss it further.

On the other hand, should a problem not be solved in a short period – say one day – the problem is escalated to the next level of management. The escalation ladder outlines who those people are from each organization, and to whom the problem is escalated should a solution not be found. By developing an escalation ladder before construction begins, the responsible people are identified and written into the partnering report. Should a problem then develop later on the site,

everyone knows who will be tasked to solve it; and, if they don't solve it who will be tasked with it next.

At the end of the partnering session, a partnering charter is developed based on the discussions that have taken place. The charter identifies the key principles and agreements identified during the session and captures them, along with the signatures from all participants. This charter provides the guiding principles for all the partners as the construction begins. Partnering charters are often framed and displayed in the construction trailers to provide a constant reminder of the principles agreed to by all parties prior to the beginning of construction.

Keep the commitment going

Once the partnering session is completed, copies of the final partnering report should be sent to all the key partners on the project. The partnering charter should be copied and sent to the construction partners and displayed throughout the work site.

As new sub-contractors come into the project, they should be provided with the partnering report and charter and then asked to verify, in writing, their commitment to adhere to the principles outlined in the report.

In addition to these activities, smaller follow-up sessions should be organized quarterly to review the partnering report. If problems have arisen on the site, was the escalation ladder used to solve them? Did the charter get discussed to move everyone toward a mutually acceptable solution? Have any new problems developed? These follow-up partnering meetings should be organized separately from the weekly construction meetings. By planning these follow-up sessions, the municipality can ensure that the partnering principles identified at the beginning of the process are adhered to throughout the construction phase by all the groups involved in the project.

This partnering approach for construction projects can help Canadian municipalities to better safeguard taxpayers from expensive litigation; contribute to a better construction workplace; adhere to schedules; and present the public with better built infrastructure projects. *MW*