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Association update: Design-build impact on cities and counties

by Michael Headrick, operations manager for the Minneapolis District of PCL Construction Services Guest Commentary

Pilot programs could point to the future

In 2009 the state of Minnesota approved design-build provisions for city and county transportation projects on a provisional basis. This approval was not made lightly and cleared a considerable hurdle in the use of a design-build project delivery model for selected public transportation projects. It was incumbent upon the proposers to clearly and quantitatively demonstrate that design-build would be in the public's best interest.

The three-year pilot program is described in Minnesota Session Law Chapter 36, and allows for up to 15 qualifying design-build projects, as determined by a designated selection council. Cities and counties can advance projects to the selection council, utilizing a process similar to the established MnDOT standards and protocols. The selection council is composed of individuals with varied, relevant backgrounds, including representatives from the American Council of Engineering Companies, Minnesota Association of Minnesota Counties (metro and greater Minnesota), the League of Minnesota Cities, and the commissioner of transportation.

Conflicts and clarifications will no doubt arise as the pilot program gets under way. Presumably, certain projects and project characteristics will benefit more from a design-build approach than others, and we will learn from experience as we move through the pilot program. The program also hinges on inclusiveness, but faces the question of how best to reconcile project requirements with any gaps in skills on the part of targeted vendors. And third, to a great extent, this will be new territory to city and county staff and elected leaders.

Most recently, Anoka County's proposal for County State Highway 14 from TH10 to TH65 was approved for design-build delivery. The proposal included two key advantages as compared with a more traditional delivery process. First, a sharply condensed construction schedule will turn over this new stretch of highway in two years instead of the originally expected six years. The value of this level of congestion mitigation is difficult to calculate but very, very real. Second, the added acceleration and coordination of the project has combined to streamline the multilayered permitting process, saving additional public dollars.

The Design-Build Institute of America's Upper Midwest Region has a vested interest in the success of the pilot program for Minnesota's cities and counties. While currently it extends through 2012, we advocate for legislation that will extend its application further into the future. Of course, while we believe in its many benefits, we will together have ample opportunity to view it in action and make our own assessments — beginning soon in Anoka County.

Michael Headrick is 2010 education committee chair of the Design-Build Institute of America – Upper Midwest Region, and operations manager for the Minneapolis District of PCL Construction Services, Inc.



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