

Public sector warming up to design-build (September 12, 2000)

By Patricia Williams
Staff Writer
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WINNIPEG - The design-build project delivery method is reaching for a new level of maturity, says contractor Barrie Fordham, a senior vice-president of Buttcon Ltd. and the co-chairman of an institute set up to promote this burgeoning approach to construction.

"Markets are expanding, private-sector owners are more willing to use alternative delivery systems and the public sector is opening up to design-build as never before," he said in a speech at a seminar sponsored by the Canadian Design-Build Institute (CDBI).

Fordham told a mix of contractors, design professionals and owners' representatives attending the two-day event that nowhere is this trend seen more clearly than among public owners.

"In many parts of Canada, governments are becoming more receptive to the idea of design-build," he said, noting that public infrastructure projects have been one of the holdouts.

Fordham, a director of the Canadian Construction Association, said the water and wastewater markets have tremendous potential for design-build projects.

"There are many cash-strapped cities which cannot afford to fund much-needed projects and alternate delivery systems and financing schemes can be used to alleviate the problems," he said.

"However, notable progress has yet to be seen in this area."

The use of the design-build approach has been more significant in the realm of transportation projects and is making inroads in some parts of Canada, Fordham said.

Further afield, he said it has become apparent that the only way Canadian companies can truly become successful on the international scene is by building design-build partnerships and by providing unique solutions to owners' requirements.

"If we can build such partnerships in Canada and then export them internationally, we might just be able to reap a much larger share of the market," he said.

"CDBI can be a mechanism to facilitate this possibility."

The institute is supporting an initiative by the Design-Build Institute of America to create an international organization. The purpose would be to set standard practices and share resources. "This might help us thrive a little better in the world market," Fordham said.

The CDBI was founded in 1998 to provide a voice for the design-build industry. It operates under the umbrella of the Canadian Construction Association.

The theme of the seminar was opportunity for innovation using this delivery mechanism.

"We chose this theme as we believe that design-build as a procurement method provides the best opportunity for innovation as it brings a number of participants to work as a team from the inception of a project to its completion," said conference chairman Randy Dhar of Public Works and Government Services Canada.

"This integrated approach brings together ideas and concepts that translate themselves into innovative solutions to owner requirements." Speakers dealt with a diverse range of subjects-among them, the role of advocate consultants, the request for proposal (RFP) process, value engineering, risk management and developments in the areas of standard documents and master specifications.

At one session, panelists looked at how prescriptive requests for proposals should be in the case of design-build projects. Contractor Doug Aris, manager of design-build services for Ellis-Don, said a successful project begins with a carefully considered request for proposal-whether that be for a simple warehouse or a more complex project such as courthouses, prisons or water treatment plants. "The more complex the project, the more sophisticated the RFP," he said.

"The more complex the project, the greater the risk for everyone. Owners must clearly, economically and accurately communicate their facility needs in the RFP document."

Aris, who estimated that design-build projects now account for about 30 percent of his firm's volume, believes it is preferable for the owner to express his needs in performance terms and let the design-builder respond "with the best means to meet those needs," he said.

Traditional, prescriptive specifications greatly limit the potential for innovation, he said.

Mixing prescriptive specifications with performance standards often leads to confusion and disputes.

"Too little information in a request for proposals is not a good thing," he said. "Too much information is not a good thing either."

A similar note was struck by Mac Bourassa, president of PCL Construction Management Inc.

"Describe the problem, not the solution," he said.