

BUILDING

NORTHERN NEVADA

NDOT partnering plan simplifying construction work

BY JOHN SEELMEYER

Talk is proving to be anything but cheap as the Nevada Department of Transportation and highway contractors begin to reap the benefits of a new approach that creates partnerships and lots of communication to get projects done.

In just one example, the process is leading to completion of a repaving job on Interstate 80 between McCarran and Vista boulevards in Sparks about four weeks ahead of schedule. Early completion brings big savings both to NDOT — it estimates savings of \$140,000 in supervisory and management costs — as well as the contractor, Sierra Nevada Construction Inc.

Most important, NDOT executives say that the partnering program appears to be dramatically reducing expensive, drawn-out disputes between the state government and highway contractors that had marred several recent projects. Jeffrey Freeman, partnering program manager in NDOT's construction division, explains how the partnering program works:

Before work begins on an NDOT project, contractor executives and members of the NDOT project team get together with a professional outside facilitator to establish goals for the project, talk about potential issues, establish a plan to resolve disputes as quickly as possible and create ways to measure their success.

At the end of the session, which can last as much as full day, all the participants sign a charter in which they commit to the goals and pledge to keep communication open.

As NDOT and Granite Construction Co. executives met to create a partnering agreement on the project to widen Highway 395 between Moana Lane and Interstate 80 in Reno, for instance, some of the goals they set included:

- A zero-accidents safety record.
- Completion of the job under budget and ahead of schedule.
- Maintaining trust and open communication.
- Reducing hassles for motorists in the area.

They've tracked their progress toward those goals with a monthly survey — so far, the NDOT and Granite teams have been in fairly close agreement in their perceptions of their progress — and they meet at least once a quarter with the outside facilitator to smooth out any differences. Important, too, is a plan to resolve issues as quickly as possible.

Richard Nelson, NDOT's assistant director for operations, says partnering agreements encourage participants to resolve issues at the lowest possible level rather than sending every question up the chain of command for a decision.

But the partnering agreements also specify how quickly questions will be resolved. On the job site, project superintendents and NDOT inspectors are expected to resolve questions within a day. Issues that get kicked up to the contractor's construction manager and NDOT's district engineer will linger no more than a week.

John Madole, executive director



PHOTOS BY JULIE DUBREUIL/NEVADA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Granite Construction, general contractor on the project to widen Highway 395 through the heart of Reno, says the partnering process has been bringing good results.



Construction of a roundabout on the Lamoille Highway in Spring Creek in Elko County was among smaller highway projects that have used the partnering approach. Contractor on the Nevada Department of Transportation project was Eagle Peak Rock and Paving.

of the Associated General Contractors Nevada Chapter, says no one should underestimate the importance of a plan to resolve disputes. Disagreements, he says, often lead to the delays that cut into contractors' profits and frustrate owners.

While the processes of the partnering program define how it will work, its success generally is determined by the trust and communication between contractors and NDOT employees, says Jeff Shapiro, chief construction engineer of NDOT's construction division.

Trust can take a while to develop — especially among state engineers and contractors who traditionally have viewed each other as adversaries.

Says Freeman, "They often don't buy into it until they have a project that uses partnering. It works." Adds Madole, "We're getting positive feedback about partnering from the contractors."

Granite Construction likes the results.

"It creates a 'team' culture between NDOT and the contractor," said Brian Roll, project manager for Granite. He says the process improves communication and allows efficient resolution of challenges in a way that both sides find agreeable. The process wins praise, too, from Roger Philippi, a professional engineer with PBS&J Corp., designer of the Highway 395 project.

"NDOT's partnering efforts on the 395 project have led to

great discussions, including solutions with the contractor and the owner," said Philippi. "It is an effective and innovative tool to improve project communications, project safety and reduce costs while delivering quality transportation projects to the public."

Partnering is mandatory for big NDOT projects — those totaling \$10 million or more — and the process has been used in nine of those jobs since early 2009. Participants in nine other smaller NDOT jobs have opted voluntarily to use partnering.

"Small jobs can blow up just as much as a big job," says Freeman. In at least one instance, a contractor on a smaller job has specifically requested that NDOT use partnering to keep the work moving smoothly.

While partnering was formally launched on NDOT projects within the past year, it's been used in neighboring states for the better of two decades.

Early advocates of the concept, which was developed by the Construction Industry Institute in the 1980s, included the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Naval Facilities Engineering Command.

In Nevada, Nelson says, partnering started to get a serious look as NDOT found itself embroiled in a number of serious disputes with contractors.

As executives of the state Department of Transportation and construction industry groups such as AGC looked at introduction of a partnering program in Nevada, they noted that successful programs need concerted leadership.

That's come from Susan Martinovich, NDOT's director. She says simply, "Partnering is our way of doing business." Next up is recognition for companies that use partnering agreements successfully.

The AGC will take a big step in that direction in November, when it adds Partnering Awards to its traditional Pinnacle Awards for excellence in construction. But the biggest rewards, NDOT's Nelson says, will be delivered to the state's taxpayers through better, more cost-effective road projects.

"Partnering is about relationships," he says. "The end game is delivering the project."

