

Team building: Construction reforms gain momentum

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Frances Hughes likens teaming architects with builders to a marriage contract where two people are working toward a common goal — only the goal is to deliver a project on time and on budget.

Teaming is an approach used frequently in the private sector, in which the architect and builder work jointly from the beginning of the design process to ensure design details are in line with cost, budget and everyone is on the same team. Aside from the Massachusetts State College Building Authority, there are few public agencies that use the team delivery method.

That could change, depending on the outcome of the legislative committee currently working on a draft proposing a change to the way public construction projects are bid. The draft is based loosely on the building authority's method. If passed as a budget rider, the reform could benefit all public agencies by this fall.

Using a team method lowers risk and shortens project length, said Linda Snyder, executive director of the MSCBA which is using teams for new student housing projects at Westfield State College, Worcester State College and Salem State College.

Snyder said the team approach is modeled after successful methods that have been used in the private sector for some time. The MSCBA was granted a statutory exemption from the state, which allows for alternative means of bidding a construction project. The current method required by the state is a version of the traditional design-bid-build, in which the builder is not involved in the process until

the very end, leaving no opportunity for collaboration on design, said Snyder.

As part of the MSCBA's method, subcontractors have to pre-qualify or meet certain criteria before they are allowed to bid on a project; in the public sector, subcontractors are selected based on the lowest bid, not necessarily qualifications.

The lack of both subcontractor screening and collaboration with general and subcontractors from a project's outset can lead to missed details on projects, and ultimately cost overruns, some say.

"We're not trying to get the cheapest building in Massachusetts," Snyder said. "We're trying to get the best possible building on budget."

Snyder said the MSCBA is currently working on Phase II of a student housing project for Fitchburg State College. The project began in September 2002 and will be complete by this July. Under the traditional design-bid-build system, the project, from start to finish and including permitting, could have taken a year longer, said Snyder.

ADD Inc.'s Hughes, project manager for a 350-bed housing project at Worcester State College, said the Cambridge firm partnered with Suffolk Construction Co. Inc. from the very beginning to win the project.

The project began in September 2002 and will be finished by the end of August. Hughes called the fast pace of the project "hard to believe."

Hughes said bringing the construction team on board from the very beginning reduces conflict on a job and allows for details to be worked out before construction begins.

"Without a doubt we are working



Fitchburg State College is a recent example of the team method, in which builders and architects work together to complete projects on time and within budget.

together to make sure this is the absolute best building for the client," Hughes said.

The team delivery method creates a system under which the construction team and architect are responsible for the project jointly, rather than placing the entire burden on either party if a costly change is needed, said Bill Hammer, a principal at HKT Architects Inc. in Medford.

HKT and Linbeck Construction Corp. in

Lexington are working on the Fitchburg State College project, and Hammer, through the Boston Society of Architects, has participated in the state's effort to reform public construction laws.

The team delivery method eliminates the finger-pointing that can happen when details are left out in architects drawings. In a typical design-bid-build process, if details that are not in drawings but are later found to be needed, subcontractors can ask for additional funding after a bid is already awarded.

"It's a lot better than the current system," said Hammer. "The current system is just a disaster; it's one where the responsibility is just displaced."

Russel Feldman, principal at TBA Architects Inc. in Waltham and a member of the state's Special Commission on Public Construction, says the bidding system is just one part of the state's efforts to reform public construction laws.

The principal reform regarding how municipalities select designers, known as the "construction management at risk legislation," is looking to create a system similar to the one MSCBA is authorized to use.

"There's just been an increased pressure to make changes," said Feldman. "Certainly, all parties agree the current system is overly complex and is generating enough cost and enough acrimony that it's undermining public construction."