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JUNE 2024

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Cooperative contracting tackles infrastructure issues

By Tammy Rimes, MPA

States, municipalities and educational institutions direct more than \$3 trillion in annual spend towards public operations in safety, social services, education, finance and transportation. By partnering with suppliers, embracing innovation and utilizing cooperative contracts, government managers seek better ways to address aging buildings and infrastructure upgrades.

FACILITIES PLANNING INTO NEXT DECADE

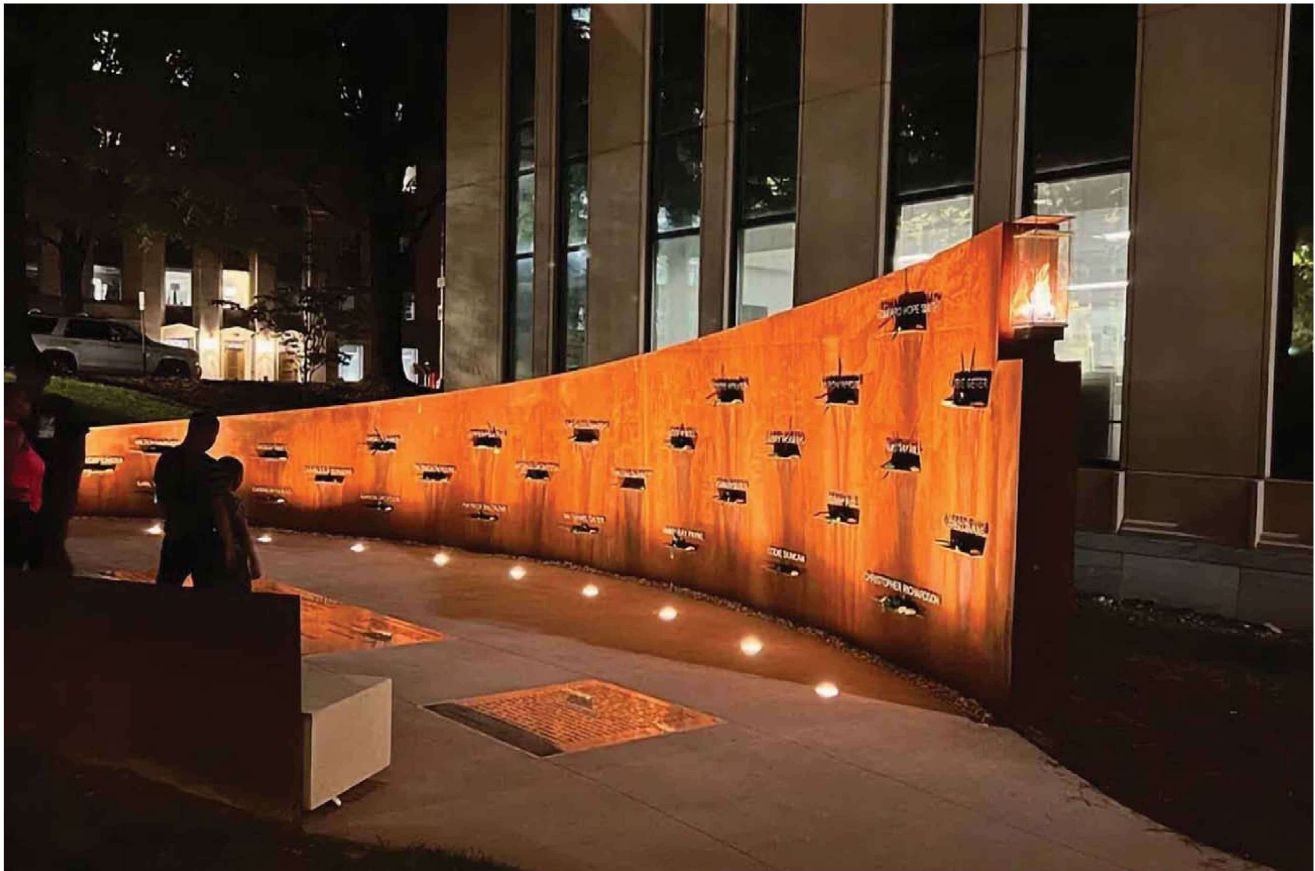
Gathering all the facility needs and costs for a large public school district for the next decade is a huge undertaking. The School District of Palm Beach County (SDPBC) in Florida, the nation's 10th largest school district, with more than 200 schools, administrative and maintenance buildings, recently undertook this daunting task within a short timeline.

David Dolan, chief of facilities management and Michael Tubiolo, director of construction were directed to prepare the required facility plans to support a proposed half cent sales tax referendum to address the district's capital

planning and facility upgrades. A comprehensive review considers each building's age and condition, with analysis of all the components—elevators, structural, HVAC, roofing, lighting, fire and security systems—to gauge the life cycle of each system. “The comprehensive plan and estimated costs will develop a budget for state review and approval prior to placing on the ballot,” Dolan says.

With this impending assignment, it just so happened that Dolan was attending a conference and was surprised to find this type of project being discussed, with advice and solutions at hand. Dolan exclaims, “I almost chose another session, but at the last minute, slipped into this one, and grateful that I did. The speaker addressed the exact type of scenario faced by our district, and I had to learn more.”

The speaker, Bill Roth from Roth IAMS, shared a solution—SLAM CAP software—to help on this project. By leveraging facility condition assessment data. The proprietary software allows the district to input data to create its own asset management story, providing reports to stakeholders, building prioritized capital plans, and implementing a capital renewal program.



City departments in Atlanta have used job order contracting (JOC) for a variety of projects, including to erect a monument to commemorate the young lives lost decades ago to the Atlanta Child Murders. Courtesy of the city of Atlanta.

Roth further explains, “The biggest challenge that SDPBC faced was the significantly short timeline for the Bond Initiative. They originally had a 30-month timeline, but then found out it was reduced to six months. Roth IAMS and SDPBC co-created a scope of work quickly to address the tighter schedule. Without time to pursue the traditional bid route, the decision was made to leverage an already awarded Sourcewell cooperative contract.”

Dolan further shared the benefits of choosing a cooperative contract. “Once procurement became involved, their review and approval of this contracting choice made it much faster to start the project,” he says. “There was an added benefit of no conflict of interest for future work, as this company would not compete on work to be conducted for repairs or construction.”

Tubiolo adds, “With so many facilities and a detailed review of every component within each building makes this a complicated project. While we will eventually need all the details for the final project scope, the immediate goal is to develop a high-level plan. This provides the dollar estimates for management review, and ultimately, for the referendum to be placed on the ballot.” If approved by the voters, the work can begin in January 2026.

As Roth has worked with many entities on capital planning, he offers words of advice, “One critical decision for organizations is to decide which facility condition dataset is right for them. In this instance, SDPBC worked on a high-level, modeled dataset, to conform with the Bond Initiative timeline. With the initial dataset complete, and additional time to develop a plan, they are moving toward a more detailed, element-level inventory and dataset for final project execution.”

JOB ORDER CONTRACTING FOR UPGRADES

Three times, the Atlanta Department of Transportation (ADOT) advertised a bid opportunity to make improvements to a busy thoroughfare intersecting with major downtown arteries. Each effort was unsuccessful, resulting in no bids. Conditions continued to devolve as the public expressed frustrations about the worsening conditions. With pressure mounting and traditional construction bidding creating undesirable outcomes, ADOT leaders decided to move forward with job order contracting (JOC) to realign Howell Mill Road, relocate utilities, install new curbing and repave the popular roadway for the \$22-million-dollar project.

The concept of JOC is an indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity construction procurement method that empowers organizations to complete projects using a single, competitively awarded contract. According to a report by the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing (NIGP) and Gordian, this single-solicitation approach saves significant time.

Atlanta takes a unique approach with JOC by enabling all city entities to have a choice of two contracts: one covers projects valued up to \$5 million and the other

covers projects valued more than \$5 million to upwards of \$25 million. This two-tiered approach provides a flexible way to build, optimize and maintain public facilities and infrastructure. One additional benefit is all tasks are priced through a Gordian Construction Task Catalog (CTC), a unit price book containing local costs for material and labor, technical specifications and general conditions. The importance of this concept is the pricing for each item is backed by research conducted by cost engineers and construction experts, providing more accurate budget estimates, thus reducing cost overruns and change orders.

The city of Atlanta began using JOC for the Department of Enterprise Asset Management, which manages an impressive portfolio of 51 facilities including 34 fire stations, eight police precincts, several neighborhood centers and city hall. Each facility has an expansive portfolio requiring routine maintenance, repairs, cleaning, and upgrades to meet existing and evolving needs. In recent years, JOC was used to pave streets around city hall, a \$5 million project. When a water main burst beneath a public office during the Christmas holidays, the city utilized JOC to begin mitigation work immediately. Various city departments have used JOC to build new fire stations and EMS facilities, install public arts projects and erect a monument to commemorate the young lives lost decades ago to the Atlanta Child Murders. In total, the city of Atlanta has completed 50 JOC projects, totaling \$90 million in construction work.

The success inspired city leaders to expand their partnership with Gordian by asking them to conduct a facility condition assessment on a 42-story building the city was interested in purchasing and developing into affordable housing. In addition to evaluating conditions, the assessment generated estimates for renewal and replacement costs using statistical modeling. The city of Atlanta not only purchased the building, but officials were so satisfied with that assessment, they asked for a citywide assessment of 145 additional buildings.

Given how quickly and dramatically facility and infrastructure conditions can deteriorate, government procurement officials are beginning to consider alternative project delivery methods to improve public assets.

USING BETTER RESTROOM TECHNOLOGIES

One area that receives the greatest scrutiny for cleanliness and generates the highest number of complaints is restroom facilities. During and after the pandemic, with increased emphasis on hygiene and hand washing, facility managers are even more proactive in maintaining sanitary conditions.

Touch-free technology has grown in popularity with preference for automated soap dispensers, toilet flushing, and paper towel dispensers. GOJO Industries Inc., the maker of PURELL products, recently helped a large public university in the Southeast upgrade their hand sanitizer dispensers throughout campus. Maintenance staff now optimize their workflow by utilizing an app-based program to easily identify when and where dispensers require a

refill. Batteries incorporated into the sanitizer refill bottle result in additional labor savings. In addition, the reduced plastic content in the refill bottles, along with third party environmental certifications, help the university achieve sustainability goals.

Here are three expert suggestions to fit any entity's needs for easier maintenance:

- **Touch-free or manual?** Manual dispensers have a simple push bar that is pressed to deliver the product, offering simplified maintenance but increased touchpoints. Touch-free dispensers reduce the transmission of germs and suffer less from wear and tear but require batteries. Opting for advanced touch-free dispensers that do not require any battery change-outs allows the best of both worlds.

- **Placement of dispensers.** Instead of asking how many dispensers are needed, the better question is, where do you need them? Certain locations require rugged dispensers that can withstand frequent use, extreme conditions and vandalism. Outdoor products may need to survive severe weather and high-traffic conditions.

- **Choose factory-sealed refills.** Topping off refillable soap dispensers is a known public health risk—the CDC and WHO have issued guidance against this practice. There is strong evidence that contaminants can be introduced when the reservoir is opened to add additional product. Choosing factory-sealed refills eliminates hazards and makes maintenance easier.

For many entities, sustainability is a growing requirement. Dean Hrabik, corporate account director, public sector for GOJO shares, “Our customers are asking for more eco-friendly product offerings. Many refills that hold hand sanitizer and soap products use less plastic and are completely recyclable. Innovative touch-free dispensers with energy source incorporated into the refill help reduce waste and streamlines maintenance.”

CHANGE ORDERS AND OVERBUDGET CONCERNS ADDRESSED

Garrett County Public Schools (GCPS) in Maryland was faced with a dilemma. While pursuing major upgrades to Grantsville Elementary School, it was determined that the architect and engineer had designed an expensive design that would exceed the budget. Open classrooms, not conducive to modern learning, were being re-designed with new walls, added lighting, doors, air conditioning and security systems. The complicated plan resulted in a constant stream of incoming change orders.

Rather than scrap the plan, the GCPS decided to pursue a different approach. With the support of the Maryland Public School Construction, the district partnered with Daikin Applied, through an OMNIA Partners cooperative contract. The choice was primarily due to the district's ability to take advantage of consulting services offered by the contract.

“Working directly with the district, we were able to meet with the architect and engineer and re-design the project on a fast track to stay within the budget,” says Sean McCarthy, senior account manager for Daikin Applied. “With the eventual use of over 26 subcontractors, it was important to have one point of contact to coordinate all project elements.” In addition to the \$6.2 million classroom modernization for the elementary school, the district also undertook a major upgrade for Southern Garrett High School.

The high school had unique requirements in combining the 7th and 8th grades with the current high school population. Many obstacles were overcome to support extracurricular activities with upgrades to bleachers, locker rooms and a brand-new dance studio, while also creating educational spaces that adequately kept individual grades as close together as possible.

McCarthy further shares, “The elementary school gym floor proved to be a challenge as the project occurred during the pandemic and the tile basketball court inlay was not available. Since the gym was used for multi-educational needs, it was decided to use strategically placed tiles as part of the design. Working with the principal and gym teacher, distinct tiles were placed to incorporate the student activities conducted within the gym. This was a creative solution to a supply chain issue.”

UPGRADING SYSTEM TO MINIMIZE WATER WASTE

The town of Hudson, located in Middlesex County, Mass., serves a community of 20,000 residents. It originally grew from being a mill town, specializing in the production of shoes and related projects until the late 1960's. While some manufacturing remains, the town is now primarily residential.

The town faced a problem with its antiquated water meter system. According to Assistant DPW Director Rajitha Purimetla, “Each year, we are required to report the amount of unaccounted water (UAW) to the state by measuring the gallons leaving the treatment plant into the distribution system, and then measure the gallons ultimately used by adding up the water





The town of Hudson, Mass., used a cooperative contract to purchase replacement water meters. Courtesy of the town of Hudeon.

usages from all combined property meters. If there is a difference, it could indicate water is leaking in one of the pipes underground, or meters are not accurately recording the right usage.” Recent reporting showed about 20% of the water was unaccounted for.

The town first conducted leak detection throughout the distribution system and ensured no water was leaking on underground water mains. The next step was to ensure all water meters were recording accurate usages. An initial challenge evolved due to five different varieties of meters installed across multiple decades. There was no standardization across the system, as the meters did not all have the same technical specifications or reading capabilities. In addition, while some meters could be read using radio readers, aging meter registers did not always function correctly. Certain meters required personnel to physically travel to the location with a touch pad, scan the reading or capture the reading from the dial with a pen and paper. “Multiple factors derived the need for a town-wide Meter Replacement Project by choosing a new, standardized meter model,” Purimetla says.

The process began by creating a list of functions required in the new meters. After reviewing available companies and existing product lines, the town narrowed its search to a product offered by one company. Purimetla recalls, “Once we started looking at Neptune 10, we found the supplier already had an awarded cooperative contract with HGACBuy.” Since the desired solution was readily available through the contract, the town decided to pursue this cooperative contracting route.

According to Cooperative Services LLC President Crosby Grindle, “Infrastructure projects are typically a high-cost investment for state and local governments. The strategic use of cooperative contracts for large projects can provide numerous benefits to local governments and served communities. Two key examples are cost efficiency and ability to use a contracting vehicle to satisfy all procurement requirements instead of embarking on a RFP process, which lengthens the time and adds to the complexity of an already daunting initiative.”

The new meters benefit property owners, due to a unique feature which helps determine if they are experiencing their own internal plumbing leaks. “Let’s say all the water faucets and shower heads are turned off, the clothes and dishwasher are not being used, and irrigation sprinklers are not running,” Purimetla says. “If the meter is still running, it’s an indication of a leak, which can often be attributed to a leaking toilet. Small leaks add up to gallons very quickly.”

The town obtained buy-in from the community by demonstrating the benefits of the new system which conserves water and accurately accounts for all water that Hudson treats and distributes. Water conservation education is a bonus part of this project. Once funding was approved, the town contracted with Ti-sales for the purchase of material. A separate RFP process secured the labor contractor for changing out the meters. The project is anticipated to be a huge win for the water department as it minimizes unaccounted water usage and reduces labor costs and the administrative burden of having to manually read meters.

Once all the meters are replaced, the town estimates the meter reading period that once took an entire month to capture usage data will be reduced to just two days. According to HGACBuy, “When governments are able to easily buy the products and services needed through cooperative contracting, to help their communities thrive, we all win.”

TAMMY RIMES, MPA, is the executive director of the National Cooperative Procurement Partners (NCPP). She formally served as purchasing agent for the city of San Diego, the ninth largest city in the nation, and emergency logistics chief during the 2007 Witch Creek Fires. Under her leadership, the city consolidated its warehouse operations, centralized all purchasing and contracting operations, and moved to a more customer focused approach.