

Outsourced Project Management Can Help Smaller Corrections Projects:



How Ontario County, N.Y., Saved \$1 Million on a \$28 Million Project

By Bob Goble and Alice Haskins

Canandaigua, N.Y., is the county seat of Ontario County, which lies in the heart of the rural Finger Lakes region of northwestern New York State. The City of Canandaigua is on the northern shore of Canandaigua Lake and is a well-known summer resort and tourist destination for New Yorkers and northeasterners.

Since the late 1980s, the 88-bed Ontario County Jail had regularly exceeded its rated capacity, and the sheriff had made local leaders aware of the need to either reduce the inmate population or build a bigger facility. In 1991, the county began contracting with other facilities to hold the excess inmates.

With the escalating pressure on the county's jail system, a task force was created in 1997. With this task force, the county planning department and sheriff's office staff prepared sound needs-assessment reports with jail population projections and public presentations that convinced the board of supervisors that a new jail was needed. Now, the question was how to best tackle such a large and complex construction project. This was a concern because everyone realized that designing and building a new 300-bed jail would be the single largest public works pro-

ject ever undertaken by the Ontario County government.

The Planning Process

Ontario County's planning department manages most capital projects. However, like any rural county, Ontario simply could not employ full-time, permanent staff with the specialty expertise needed to fully plan, manage and control the technically complex design and construction of a jail that was expected to cost more than \$20 million. Outsourced special support was needed beyond the usual architecture and engineering services and contractors.

In 1998, the board chairman appointed five county supervisors to serve as the Jail Capital Project Committee, charging them to oversee the project on behalf of the board of supervisors, with staff support and a liaison to be provided by the

county's associate planner. The liaison was the county's point person who worked closely with the committee, other county staff and agencies, and all hired companies to get the new center built within budget. Although it was not his only staff responsibility, it would be his major work focus for the next five years.

As a first step, committee members and staff toured newly constructed or recently expanded state and county correctional facilities. They learned about direct supervision of inmates and its benefits made possible by a contemporary facility design. They found that some projects had major problems that had to be corrected or changed during the construction process — and, in some cases, afterwards. The committee heard stories about too many changes during design and construction and state-mandated changes after

construction, all of which resulted in over-budget spending. They heard from the State Commission of Correction and the National Institute of Corrections about project management firms and decided that they wanted one that specialized in corrections and had the expertise to avoid the problems they had heard about.

The decision was made to first hire a program management firm, then follow with an architecture and engineering design firm and a construction manager. Carter Goble Associates Inc. was selected in May 1999 as the county's project management firm. The firm's scope of work required developing an architectural space program to guide the design of the new jail; providing a full-time resident project manager (PM) experienced in corrections design and construction; and providing support by diverse company staff and resources to be able to deal with any aspect of the project's planning and development. The resident PM would live in Canandaigua and remain focused on the jail project from initial planning through the opening and first occupancy of the facility. He would also assist in correcting any deficiencies during a six-month, post-occupancy shakedown and monitoring period.

Initial Steps

The early work by Carter Goble focused on developing the architectural space program, assisting the county in evaluating and selecting a site, establishing an approved preliminary project budget, and selecting and hiring a design architect and construction manager.

Once the project management team completed preparation of the architectural space program for an expandable 300-bed facility in September 1999, the preliminary total project cost estimate (construction plus all other project costs) in 1999 dollars was approximately \$30 million on either of the two final optional sites being considered. This figure was not popular or acceptable to some supervisors or at public meetings, and press coverage reflected the division of attitudes.

So, in late 1999, the county directed the project management firm to devise options that would bring the construction cost estimate down as close to \$21 million as possible. Working with the project architect and county staff, a revised space program plan was developed that called for the design and request of a base bid for the construction of a 240-bed facility, with a bid option to add one housing pod to bring the capacity to 300 beds.

County staff and the project management team did a substantial amount of early analysis and planning to help justify the site selection from among three optional sites between July 1999 and July 2000. As the revised program was finalized and the schematic design was developed and tested on the sites, the site adjacent to the county archives, human services and public health buildings in the town of Hopewell was eventually selected. It had some savings on grading cost estimates, less visibility from the main local road, and provided more room for long-range expansion.

Planning and Design

By July 2000, the Commission of Correction adopted a new regulation that, for the first time in New York, permitted double-bunking in the initial construction of a county jail. This regulatory change allowed the county to "get more for their money" by enabling the original 240-bed plan to become 276 beds with only slight changes in the space program and schematic design.

An important long-range, cost-saving planning concept, which was supported by the county from the beginning of programming in 1999, was that the new center's support core elements and functions should be initially sized for expansion to at least 500 beds. The jail planning committee and county staff had seen time and again examples of expansion projects that were inordinately complex, expensive and time consuming because basic support core spaces had to be expanded with every addition of housing units. To avoid this problem, the space program and resulting design provided building support core elements and functions with enough floor area so that future housing unit additions would require only added support-space equipment and furnishings, as the interior space was already there. The only new construction needed for bed additions beyond double-bunking would be new housing pods. Their addition was master planned in



Early foundation work, May 2002



Aerial view, April 2003

the original site layout and building system's engineering design.

Highly Participatory Planning. One of the planning and design process hallmarks of the Ontario project that was fostered by county leaders and staff, and proved to be a major benefit, was a high degree of staff and public participation. Every step of the way for all aspects of project planning and design, anyone who might have any interest or some relevance to the project was invited to participate in monthly committee review meetings, public workshops and team working meetings.

Comprehensive Review Process. All proposals, all elements of design and the evolution of the design were subjected to comprehensive assessments from all angles and aspects by committee members, staff and technical specialists. Each design element had to be justified from every viewpoint. The benefit of the challenges and high level of scrutiny was that in addition to high quality, there were no surprises when the building was completed and operations were activated.

Design and Construction Cost-Savings Decisions. To help control the project's cost, the project team kept a strong focus on looking for cost-saving opportunities through all phases of design and construction.

The decision to use precast modular cells was estimated to save approximately \$288,000 (or \$1,200 per cell for all 240 cells) compared with conventional masonry cells. A design decision was also made to use exterior cavity walls instead of brick or block veneer, which alone saved approximately \$50,000.

Food service production, delivery options and kitchen layout were subjected to extensive reviews that included analyzing contracting alternatives with the private sector and a state prison, and consideration of cook-chill versus conventional cook-to-serve systems. The end result was a more efficient conventional cook-to-serve kitchen design that had reduced square footage and required less equipment than normal. It also had the capability to use cook-chill food from an external supplier if such an operational change was desired in the future.

Cost Additions. Even with the county leadership's desire to minimize the project cost, there were a few design-element decisions that added initial costs to the project, which were supported by the county because of their long-range savings potential. These design elements ranged from creating a separate construction entrance to adding parking spaces and improving the public

road by adding a turning lane and street lights at the public entry to the county complex.

As of October 2000, the architect's preliminary cost estimates, based on the schematic design, was for an approximate \$22.6 million in construction costs with a total project cost of \$29.2 million for a 276-bed facility that included a support core sized for at least 500 beds. Construction bids were received in February 2002, and a total project budget of \$28.75 million was approved by the county board.

Construction Phase And Cost Control

Construction project information and communication documents, including change order requests, often are simply passed on without careful consideration of cost impacts. Although this seems like an obvious cost-control mandate for any job, especially government projects, the level of checking and scrutiny on this project was given top priority by virtue of the county's initial and constant focus on minimizing cost, made clear in the decision to hire both a PM and a construction manager (CM). Virtually nothing was given a "free pass," and every directive, request and response to information requests was examined by the on-site team comprising the PM, the architecture and engineering firm, and the CM.

The presence of a resident, full-time PM experienced in corrections construction and operations allowed immediate and full attention to the special nature of constructing and operating a 24-hour secure confinement facility. If there was an unusual question about any item that the on-site team encountered, the resident PM was able to call on home-office staff specialists to discuss or help conduct technical assessments of options for any potential impact on operations, security, first cost or operating cost. The benefit/cost of all actions in relation to change or potential change from the design intent was always considered while making any

decision regarding changes from the construction documents.

The dedication of the jail committee, a county staff project manager and an assigned jail staff transition team throughout the entire project made it possible to gather information quickly and convene special meetings at any time, explore options carefully, predict potential impacts and develop a workable consensus solution. The totality of county officials' and staffs' involvement and commitment to make this project a success resulted in the "right answer" or directive to the contractors in an expeditious manner that limited delays and, thus, extra cost.

When the project was financially closed out by the county's associate planner/project manager in 2005, he reported that \$1,044,070 remained unused from the final \$28.75 million project budget and would be returned to the county's capital reserve fund. So, the final total project cost was \$27,705,929, or \$100,384 per bed. It is important to note that the relatively low total project cost at approximately 20 percent of construction was made possible by the fact that the sheriff's corrections staff worked with a furnishings, fixture and equipment budget that was very low for a correctional facility

project, and they completed their own transition/activation planning, training and move-in without any significant outside help.

Selecting a PM

From Ontario County correctional staff's experience on this project, there are several important conditions and requirements they recommended in selecting a PM to guide the planning, design and construction of a new correctional facility:

- The resident PM must have an understanding of why correctional staff are asking for inclusion of certain spaces and fixtures;
- The PM must have a willingness to listen to correctional staff whose careers are devoted to working in the facility;
- The PM must have public relations skills because a wide variety of area residents may become actively involved in the project's development, either to support or oppose it;
- The PM must possess design and construction conditions knowledge so that he or she can readily understand architecture and engineering

drawings, documents, estimates and technical analyses; see what is missing, misplaced or inadequate; and be able to effectively communicate it to all affected parties; and

- The PM has to make a full-time commitment, meaning it is his or her most important work activity for the duration of the project.

Opening and Operating

Ontario County's new 276-bed jail had its ribbon cutting ceremony in October 2003. The correctional administrator and staff devised a move-in plan that resulted in all inmates being moved into the new center within two weeks of the grand opening.

Six months after the opening, the PM conducted a final six-month post-occupancy assessment. This assessment included an anonymous questionnaire given to half of the center's staff and a physical plant inspection by the project management team and follow-up personal interviews with supervisory and line staff. The results showed that almost all staff felt the new direct-supervision facility was a drastic improvement over the physical and operational conditions of the old facility. Also, one of the county's original project goals "to provide a platform to be able to encourage criminal offenders to change their negative behaviors" had been achieved with a facility that provided spaces for inmate programs, education, training and counseling functions.

Since the facility's activation in late 2003, the New York Commission of Correction has promoted it as a demonstration model for other New York agencies because of its successful physical plant conditions as well as its staff's exemplary operating and inmate management practices.

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Medium-security housing pod, October 2003