



The Right Way to Construct a Design-Build Project

by Jeff Dalton

The Indian gaming market continues to expand at a steady pace, and tribes across the country are planning to expand, remodel, or build new casinos, hotels, and full destination resorts. In many instances, using the design-build (d/b) method of construction can be the fastest, most cost effective way to get your gaming facility built. With design-build, the tribe contracts with one party, usually a general contractor, who then manages all the parties responsible for both design and construction, including the architect. However, simply using a design-build contract isn't a guarantee of success. Success comes from using design-build the right way. If you're contemplating a design-build project, here are a few key points to consider.

Gaming/Resort Experience of the Team is Critical

It is critical that both the contractor and his design partner have knowledge of casinos, resorts, and other similar projects. Experience of the two firms working together on previous design/build projects is also very beneficial. Design-build projects require the highest levels of trust and communication between all members of the team and the owner. Working with experienced professionals will allow the team to work at an accelerated pace, and deliver your project in as efficient a manner as possible.

Construction of the Angel of the Winds Casino in Arlington, Washington is an example of a design-build project that was successful in all aspects. JE Dunn Construction teamed with ICI Design Group, an architecture firm with extensive gaming experience. The team also had experience together on past successful gaming projects. The project budget called for a simple structure, but both Dunn and ICI knew the importance of "curb appeal" and that the façade required interesting and attractive features. Potentially the design, and the corresponding cost, could have ranged widely, but by working together the main entry had a welcoming design that showed off tribal culture at within the original budget.

Open Communication and Careful Listening

When the owner explains their desires for their project, it's vital that the builder and designer listen carefully. It is also important that all members of the team are present. Often times a contractor will try to reduce the architect's involvement to save costs. This is a mistake, especially at the early stages of design, and will doom the project before it even starts. Design-build can be a very efficient delivery method for design and construction, but the

design-build contractor needs the experience to know when it is not wise to limit team involvement. When all members of the team understand the needs of the project, they can more effectively work toward the common objective.

Although not a full design/build project, the Bear River Casino in Eureka, California posed many of the same challenges and solutions. The site available for gaming had poor soils, adding cost to the construction budget. The program was defined and had to be met, and of course the design and feel of the casino had to be attractive and pleasing to the customers. With other nearby casinos successfully serving the market, the architect, Group West Companies, had a tall challenge with a limited budget. Through excellent team communication and input from the owner the end product is very exciting and attractive, and performance has exceeded all projections - the desire of all owners. By including all team members in the early discussions they were each able to contribute their expertise to attain the end product.

Understanding Tribal Culture

The contractor responsible for the design-build project must understand tribal culture, especially the fact that there are multiple decision makers. A contractor who is accustomed to managing projects with one corporate decision maker might be surprised at the diverse range of members making up a typical tribal council. In addition, tribal decision makers usually have a more personal connection and dedication to the project. These men and women know they are doing something beneficial for their community by enhancing economic growth and getting an opportunity to display their tribal culture and heritage. Their interest in and commitment to the project isn't just business, it's personal.

Encouraging Local and Tribal Participation

Most Native American casinos are located in geographic areas lacking a strong subcontractor base. A design-build contractor must pay special attention to this factor and plan accordingly. It's also important that the contractor have experience working with the Native American owners to maximize opportunities for employment and sub-contracting for tribal members, whether by working through a TERO office, seeking out tribal members on their own, or working with subcontractors to employ tribal members.

Design-build can add challenges to the construction

process in the field, but also provides a number of new opportunities for employment. Many design-build projects will incorporate a fast track approach to construction, creating opportunities for field design and management in addition to construction trades.

Deciphering needs vs. wants

The number one benefit that most people will cite when asked about a design-build approach is reduction of schedule. While it is true that a good design-build team can be more efficient in delivering services, it is still a challenge for the whole team to keep up with accelerated construction in this fast track environment. The fundamental task of a design-build contractor is to transform the desires of the owner into a design and budget that can hold up through construction.

To do that, a good design-build contractor must carefully balance project needs and project wants. Just because the contract is held by the general contractor does not mean they are performing the design—and that is a good thing. By working closely with a talented and experienced casino/resort architect the design-build team can ensure they are maximizing design and function within the budget and on schedule. Each team member has their strengths, and when a good team is clicking the benefit to the owner is greater than either would provide individually.

Conclusion

From the contractor's perspective, design-build casino projects are uniquely rewarding. There's a tremendous satisfaction from watching a tribe open their new casino and knowing the benefit that the tribal community will receive. Design-build contracting is extremely well suited to Native American casino projects and keeping these guidelines in mind will help the design-build casino project to be a success. ♣

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