

# Partnerships at Work: From Schmoozing to Strategizing

*Compiled from interviews, Winter 2008*

*Every job requires the coordinated efforts of many people, and the negotiation of changes if intended outcomes are misinterpreted. Whether it is a small detail on a plan sheet being clarified by the designer or the Big Picture being outlined by the Division Engineer, retirees remembered developing their own methods for getting the job done right. Sometimes their strategies have taken surprising turns.*

As in any work situation where people and offices have to work together to put out a finished product, there are inevitably times when the original intent is not correctly interpreted somewhere along the way. John Bucholtz spent time in both design and construction and later became Chief of the Drafting Department. He recalled a couple of instances of how the designer's intent and the drafter's interpretation were not in sync, either with each other or with the project's needs.

One instance occurred when he was running the Drafting Department. He was working late and nearly everyone else had gone home. Ray Westby, the head of Preconstruction, was also still in the office, and had been reviewing a set of plans. John described Ray walking into his office and laying the plans on his desk. "He says, 'This design is wrong.'

"I said, 'I didn't design it,'" but Ray told him, "Well, you should have caught it."

"I says, 'We're just a drafting department....What the designers...design, we draw.'" Ray was very detail oriented, John recalled, which turned out to be a good thing for that particular set of plans, as they were able to make needed corrections before the design was sent to the field. On another project, however, work had gotten under way when John caught a drafting error on a project he had designed. This time it took a different type of late night conversation to negotiate the correction.

"I was on a construction job going up to Mt. Rainier, past Morton," John said. It was part of a summer construction assignment, and he remembered that the project engineer was "a free-wheeling type...drank a little bit, liked the ladies....One time, the contractor (even) sent some ladies up to entertain him."

John had been on the project awhile before he realized it was one of his own designs. The project had already been graded when he noticed a curve that was extra wide. "Why is it so wide?" he asked.

They said, "there's a chain-up lane."



*A road in Mt Rainier National Park. WFLHD Construction Archives.*

“I said, 'that's not supposed to be supered like that, that's supposed to be flat,' (but) somehow it had slipped up and never got on the plans that way.”

Cross-sections were still being done manually, so they went back and checked the cross-section rolls. “There it was, I had designed it flat, so they had to go re-grade it.”

To accomplish that, the project engineer had to convince the contractor to do the rework. “He had to go share a bottle with the contractor and negotiate it again. That's how they negotiated things, they were buddies.”

John noted that “Walt Franz was the second in command on the job, and like me, he was a good old stubborn German.” When ideas were being tossed around and John had a suggestion to make, he quickly learned there was a special way of getting an idea into Walt's head. “One time we were putting in some guardrail, and I said it would be nice to have it go – thus.” Walt rejected the proposal out of hand.

After that, John learned he could start to describe his idea, then take it back. “I'd say, 'Walt, how about – ’ and begin to describe the suggestion, then say, “no that's not a good idea,' and (I'd) walk away. He'd think about it. Next day, if it was good, he'd take it.”

Jim Hall had learned plenty about how to deal with decision makers, having spent much of the first part of his career in the Washington Office. He found there were still a few lessons to be had, however, when he went to his first forest highway meeting in Alaska.

He had taken on the job of Division Engineer at Western Direct Federal Division in 1978. “We were just taking the program back,” he said, after it had been run by the states for awhile. “Alaska was one of the states that didn't want to give up the program.” They wanted to keep the forest highway program to keep their people in work. “They also thought that nobody outside of Alaska knew how to build roads in the north in the cold.”

Eldon Green, Regional Administrator in Portland, also participated in the meetings, and he traveled up up to Juneau with Jim to try to “explain to them with me that they weren't going to keep the program.”

Jim lamented that it seemed that meetings in Alaska always took place in the winter. “I'd go up, I'd be dressed for office work, get in the plane, we're just going a little way north. I'd get out in the snow and the cold and (it was) miserable, and finding your way to the hotel with nobody to show you in the middle of the night – it's always interesting.

“We always stayed at the Prospector Hotel (in) downtown Juneau,” and when they arrived they'd take the first opportunity to meet with the Division Administrator. “We'd always get together – maybe with the Forest Service – and talk about our strategy for the meeting.” That night when they arrived, they went to the bar at the Prospector and talked until late into the night. Then, Jim said, “I made my way to my room, glad to be there, closed the door, got my clothes about halfway off, and knock, knock, knock at the door.” As he opened the door, he wondered who would be coming around so late at night. “There's this guy – 280-300 pounds, 6'5” – standing in my door. I thought, God – he could eat me,” he was so big.

The guy pushed his way into the room, saying “I want to talk to you.” Jim tried to object, still wondering what the guy wanted. “He said, 'I heard you talking in the bar.

You're going to the forest highways meeting tomorrow." Jim acknowledged that and the guy continued: "I'm the state planning engineer. I'm going to be in the meeting tomorrow representing the state, and I want to know what you were talking about so I can be prepared." Of course, as Jim noted, their conversation had been mostly about "how to get around him.

"He was much more drunk than I was," Jim said, "and neither of us were in perfect shape. We had a long conversation," and apparently the guy was satisfied with what he learned. "When he left, I was so happy." But, Jim also acknowledged, "it made me more aware (that) when you're talking strategy, look around."

Recalling that incident reminded him of another visit to the Prospector Hotel. The strategy meetings in the bar – now accompanied by a bit more circumspection – had become "kind of a tradition for us," he said, and after another such session he didn't get up to his room until late. But when he opened the door, "there was this woman lying in bed, completely naked... and I was horrified....

"I was out of there....(saying) 'I'm sorry ma'am, I'm sorry ma'am,'" Apparently she was not as worried as he was. "You think that men are aggressive, and woman not, but she was just happy as could be," he said. "She was just laughing....She wasn't bothered a bit, but I was."

He still isn't sure how it happened, he said, thinking perhaps the staff had given him the key to the wrong room. "I just unlocked my room and walked in. It's one of those things that's forever in my mind, (and I wonder) 'God, how did I do that?'"

Whether it was in meetings with our agency partners or conversations with fellow employees, experiences such as these have provided insights into how others think and work. As John Bucholtz observed, these little incidents "don't mean an awful lot, but they're interesting," and, he also observed, you do "learn about people that way."

*John Bucholtz spent his 35 year career at Western Federal Lands, much of it in drafting and design. Jim Hall was in Washington, DC, for about 14 years before becoming Division Engineer at in the Vancouver Office.*

*Stories in this series have been developed by Marili Green Reilly from interviews and correspondence. If you have memories to share about your experiences on direct federal projects, you may email them to [marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov](mailto:marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov).*