



BC's Steve Hollett does the partnering numbers

by Jeff Jedras

During a career in the public sector at both the federal and provincial level that spans some 30 years, Steve Hollett has a very good idea about what works, and what doesn't, in the way government does business.

Now, as senior vice president of Partnerships British Columbia – the newly created quasi-government agency charged with leading the development of public-private partnerships (P3s) in the province – Hollett has a new opportunity to put them into practice.

During his government service, mainly in finance and the treasury board, Hollett says he has seen firsthand the difficulty the public sector has in delivering major projects on time and on budget. “What motivates me is that we can improve the delivery of public infrastructure and public projects in a more cost effective way, in a more timely way, by involving the private sector through P3s,” says Hollett. “It’s exciting to me because I think this is going to address many of the problems we’ve been struggling with for the last 20 or 30 years.”

A native west coaster, Hollett earned a BSc and an MA from the University of British Columbia before venturing eastward to Ottawa in 1971 to begin his career with the federal Treasury Board. After two and a half years in Ottawa, Hollett returned to BC, holding several successive positions within the economic policy and finance/treasury board portfolios.

He says he has been fortunate enough not to be in one area too long, allowing him to gain a wide variety of experiences. Upon returning to BC, he worked primarily in the resource sectors, and later moved into major product development and negotiations.

“I’ve had a lot of opportunities to take on different challenges and I’ve been able to work on many large, interdisciplinary projects,” says Hollett. “I’ve either been the province’s executive project director or the chief negotiator, depending on the nature of the project.”

Along with his appointment in 1996 as assistant deputy minister (ADM), business partnerships division within the Ministry of Finance, this experience laid the groundwork for Hollett’s current work with P3s. As ADM, Hollett was responsible for the development and implementation of alternative business models for government, including P3s.

It was a challenge, Hollett recalls, but among the key lessons he took from the job was that much of what government does is very interrelated, in terms of the different ministries, and it’s critical to be able to bring all of those agencies to the table to solve a problem or to complete a project.

Hollett says two critical factors will need overcoming to implement the province’s new vision for P3s – a vision he has been overseeing with Partnerships BC since May 2002. First, the capacity inside the public sector to do these public-private partnerships is very limited, and second, the government’s understanding of what the private sector needs are is also limited. Conversely, the private sector doesn’t have a good understanding of government.

“A critical factor is they don’t understand the whole notion that in the public sector you’re facing multiple objections that are often conflicting, creating the need to strike a balance,” says Hollett. “[Partnerships BC] has to be able to bring those two solitudes together, each side understanding the needs and requirements of the other side, and that will be a major challenge.”

Another major problem Hollett is facing is resources, with departments going through a tremendous downsizing in all areas. “In the Ministry of Transportation, which we’re working with on some projects under consideration, their staff reductions amount to about 61 percent,” he says. “As you’re going through staff reductions, you’re also, at the same time, trying to find resources to work on these projects, and that’s very hard to do; it’s hard to get continuity.”

With toll roads to fund, new highways and privatization of some health care services reported to be among the projects being considered for P3s, Hollett says overcoming some of the public perceptions around P3s and building a comfort level will be necessary. “We’re going to be moving from a model

where people are used to seeing services and projects delivered by the public sector, and now, more and more, they will be delivered by the private sector,” says Hollett. “We need to help the public see that they’re not going to see service levels decrease, they won’t necessarily be paying more for service, and the quality will still be there.”

Jeff Jedras is a Vancouver-based freelance journalist whose work has appeared in Silicon Valley NORTH, Technology in Government and Computer Dealer News, among others.

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