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Who Provides Inspection?

Mark Baker, P.E., M.ASCE

As billions of taxpayer dollars are poured into public works and government construction projects, who is overseeing the work?

Historically, most construction failures are caused by workmanship errors—and the magnitude of the problem grows exponentially as the pace of construction increases. As the pool of qualified/experienced workers is exhausted, unskilled, untrained and unsupervised labor is pulled into action, inevitably leading to costly mistakes. This is evidenced by the spate of high profile construction failures during the past decade.

In addition, projects that are started hastily, without complete or properly checked construction documents, must rely on field staff to make critical decisions on missing, incomplete or inadequate details. Without adequate inspection, errors, material substitutions and field modifications are not caught, resulting in potentially life threatening situations (at worst) and expensive failures and repairs (at best).

The current government cash infusion into infrastructure, including highway and transportation, energy, environmental and clean water projects, and building projects, including energy upgrades for federal buildings, restoration and modernization of military-related buildings, and construction and upgrades of hospital and medical facilities for the Veterans Administration, while welcome (and overdue), is exhibiting both of these unfortunate conditions. Federal, state and local governments have been racing to start projects in an effort to tap into the \$130 billion dollar American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds slated for construction, before they run out. As a result, many agencies have budgets many times larger than they are used to managing, an aggressive schedule for spending the funds, and incomplete designs or plans for the work. In a 2009 *USA Today* article titled *Warnings: Stimulus Money Could Swamp Agencies*, it was reported that a Florida agency, which had been previously working with a \$40,000 budget, is reported to have received \$ 2.6 million dollars in stimulus funds. The executive director is quoted as saying, "It's a tremendous amount of money. I don't anticipate any difficulty in spending it."

The result is a perfect storm of overwhelmed agencies rushing projects, hiring contractors who are rapidly running out of qualified staff, with little or no plan in place to review and inspect the work. Unless QA/QC procedures are incorporated and implemented for these programs, much of the stimulus money will be lost in waste, failures will occur and lives will be lost.

The engineering profession, and organizations like ASCE, need to acknowledge that there is a problem, and take an active role in educating those agencies that are contracting this work. They need to recognize the importance of adequately funding quality control/quality assurance programs, and that the cost of hiring an engineer to monitor construction will be far less than the cost of fixing problems that can result if they don't.

Mark Baker, President of IBA Consultants, is the Chair of CI's Construction Quality Management and Inspection Committee. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, and not necessarily shared by the Construction Institute. ♦