

Build it right

by BRIAN LOCKHART

For several years I used to travel to a nearby city to pay some bills.

I made the trip once or sometimes twice per month.

At the time, they were undergoing major work on the transit line, consisting of building fancy new bus stops and bus-only lanes. It was an interesting concept that would improve transit in the city.

During the construction phase, travel in the area was a nightmare. Two lanes were reduced to one in all directions right at one of the main intersections in town.

You would come to a stop with maybe 30 cars ahead of you at the red light. It was frustrating, but I thought at the time that's what progress is, and sooner or later, they will complete the project, and the traffic should improve.

However, the situation went on for years. I started wondering exactly what they were doing.

Over the course of the year I watched the progress on the project. I noted, I never actually saw anyone working there. Never.

There were traffic pylons in place, piles of rubble where the sidewalks and curbs were removed, and big machines sitting at the side of the road.

But I never saw anyone actually on the site doing work. I never saw any of the machines in action.

Where they working at night only?

This project took several years to complete.

I had a discussion with a local business owner about the situation. He saw the construction was costing him business due to lack of parking, and as a local resident it was frustrating because the project was taking years. He also observed he never saw anyone actually working on the project.

He complained to city hall, to no avail.

The same municipality started another project but it was outside of town in a more rural area.

The big signs went up showing how they were widening and improving the intersection for better traffic flow. It took at least a year, and once again, I passed idle machines and an empty workplace.

By chance, I was working on another project and was speaking to someone in the town administration and asked what the deal was on the transit project.

I was told that since they have other projects on the go at the same time, sometimes they have to be off-site. That wasn't a good answer, and the person was very vague.

Why would you hire a contractor to do a project knowing they are doing other projects at the same time that would be taking them away from your construction?

That seems to be the way municipal governments operate.

Down the street from where I live, a home owner is building, apparently an entire house, in his back yard. How he got a permit for that, I don't know because his neighbours will never see the sun shine in their yard again because of this giant monolith that is being erected.

However, I was impressed how fast this new house was going up. The home owner is a friend of a friend, so I met him one day, and asked how it was being built so fast.

He explained he had contracted a company that has a dedicated team for the project. Very simple. Here's the plan ? build it.

During the course of my work at another newspaper, CFB Borden was part of the coverage area.

I spent considerable time there and always enjoyed interacting with the military personnel and seeing their equipment.

The one thing I noticed, is the military does things quickly, and they do it right ? the first time. In their business, if you don't do it right, people get killed.

That attention to detail and planning and following through means success.

I don't think municipalities need to adopt military strategies when planning, however taking a cue from military planning and execution wouldn't be a bad thing.

I attended the opening of a new arena once. The mayor of the town proudly proclaimed that the building was completed 'on time, and on budget.' That's seems to be a rarity when it comes to any level of government projects.

Canada in general, is still well ahead of most other countries when it comes to planning and execution of projects with public money. Just ask someone in a town in Russia when the last time they successfully had a road paved, because the money for the project has already been stolen by one of the oligarchs who control the public purse.

At least our system provides accountability for those public funds.