

*“Not everyone on the committee needs to be familiar with construction. In fact, it is more important that they represent the various facets of the community.”*

## Top 10 Things to Know When you are on a Building Committee

*Eric MacInerney; Partner, Heimsath Architects*

With over 50 years of experience and 200 plus religious/non-profit projects completed, Heimsath Architects has learned a lot about the process of building for community driven volunteer groups. More personally, most of my 15 plus years of experience have been spent understanding groups, helping them find their vision, and shepherding that vision into physical form.

One thing I know is that being on a Building Committee is a time consuming and often under appreciated job. The countless hours spent worrying and discussing about how to best steward the donated funds is a monumental but essential task. We really do appreciate all those volunteers who give up their personal time to provide their knowledge and experience to help get the project completed.

Knowing that often many of you do not come from construction backgrounds, I am offering you these 10 pointers to make your life easier. Even if you are used to construction, constructing a building with a committee is an art form in itself so these pointers should help you as well.

### **1. There will be problems**

Whether it is design priorities, style, budget issues, unforeseen construction problems, city entitlements, code issues or all of the above, constructing or renovating a building is a highly complicated process and problems will occur. However, knowing that problems will arise from time to time is typical will help you focus on what the problem is rather than that there is a problem. It is our experience that if a group knows its priorities and communicates well with each other, the solutions will present themselves. Then it is just a matter of deciding which solution is the best solution. Often we have found that the solutions that arise make the project stronger.

### **2. Contingencies are Crucial**

Given that there will be problems, it is best to have as many possible solutions so that the best one can be selected. Often these solutions involve added cost and therefore all budgets should have reasonable contingencies built in. It is very tempting when budgets are tight (and they always are) to reduce the contingencies to make the initial budget work. However, this often results in having to make bad decisions later because there is no cost flexibility. It is OK to have plans for using the contingency if it is not used, but these should be things that can be added at the end of the project without affecting the rest of the project if they are not done.



### **3. Good Business = Good Projects**

The professionals, contractors and sub contractors you work with are most often very interested in working with you to get the best possible project. However, they are also trying to make a living. It is very important, to the extent possible, that every team member be rewarded for their contributions. This means being respectful of people's time and extra effort, making timely decisions, respecting past actions of the group. There is a natural tendency, especially when budgets are tight, to get the best possible

pricing for the organization no matter what, and there are situations where sub-contractors, general contractors, architects, etc. for whatever reason will be losing money on your project. However, the project suffers and often in unseen ways whenever there is a team member who is not profitable. Though sometimes this is unavoidable, it is best to not to try force situations that will cause a team member to lose money. It may save money in the short term, but it is our experience that it eventually costs the project more.



### **4. Communication is Key**

In many respects, communication is really the main job of a building committee member. You need to communicate with the community and the other committee members to understand what the needs and constraints are for the project. You need to communicate these needs and constraints to the design and construction professionals and understand the issues that the professionals bring to the discussion. You need to communicate back to the community what is going on so that the community will understand and support the effort. Most importantly this all needs to be done civilly, openly, and freely. Hidden agendas, egos, negative emotions, and close-mindedness all restrict communication and make an already difficult process more so. Setting and maintaining clear expectations and being clear about how and why those expectations change if necessary is crucial to having a smooth project.

### **5. Speak up Now**

You may not be familiar with the design and construction processes, but you are on the Building Committee for a reason. You represent facets of the organization, and if you have a question, you can be sure that others in the community will have the same question. Do not be afraid to ask questions if you do not understand. If something in the design or process does not make sense to you, make sure you get it explained. In general, the earlier an issue is brought up in the process, the more easily it can be solved and incorporated.

### **6. Listen**

This is the hardest part of the whole job. There are many different people involved in the various processes and each comes to the project with a different perspective and experience—even within a small



community. Stopping to really understand what someone else is saying especially if it is counter to our own hopes and goals is incredibly difficult but critical. Try stating their position back to them in your words to make sure you know where they are coming from. Make sure you are entering into a true dialogue. This is not just true for your other committee members, you need to be sure to listen to your staff, your community, your professionals, and other experts. The best solutions often come from the middle ground.

### **7. Work with Professionals. Trust your Professionals.**

Working with community-driven, committee-oriented groups is more of an artform than a strict process. The process can drive otherwise great architects and contractors crazy. This in turn makes the decision process for the Building Committee difficult and can cause increased costs. Do your homework, make sure the team members have a lot of experience with similar projects and groups. Talk to past clients about the decision process and make sure those you hire are ready. Once you have the professionals, listen to them but also make sure you are being heard. Engage in a dialogue with your professionals, but try to avoid second guessing.

*“...communication is really  
the main job of a building  
committee member.”*

### **8. Experience Not Required**

Not everyone on the committee needs to be familiar with construction. In fact, it is more important that they represent the various facets of the community. However, it is good to have some members with construction experience just to add to the comfort level to what your professionals are telling you. Once construction starts, it is best to have a member or two to work as the primary contact for construction issues. This way small issues can be solved quickly without bringing the whole committee into the discussion, and large issues can be brought to the committee quickly and knowledgably. There will be issues that come up during construction that need quick decisions and if the methods are set up in advance this will go smoothly.

### **9. Interest/Focus Groups**

Interest/Focus groups (often formally established as Sub Committees) are very important. They allow a small group of interested and knowledgeable people to focus on particular aspects of the project. This is information you need. However, they do not have the vision of the entire project like the building committee. It is important that they know they are making recommendations to the Building Committee -- not decisions. Sometimes it is beneficial to have a building committee member in each sub group to ensure that each sub committee's issues are brought to the whole Building Committee. Have the sub-committee present their recommendations in written form so there is not confusion. Be sure to communicate back to the committees why decisions have been made and to set expectations. The sub group members are also spending personal time to help the project and thus have an expectation of being heard and considered.



## 10. Construction

The purpose of being on the Building Committee is to get something built and thus most likely you will have a General Contractor. You will want to pick a General Contractor who has a great reputation, who has work with many clients similar to you, and whose typical projects are on the same scale as yours. You do not want your project to be the among smallest (you may not get the attention you deserve) or the largest (they may not be ready for the scope) projects the contractor has. The organization of the general contractor, their relationship with you, their relationship with their sub, their project management, and the ways they deal with the inevitable problems that arise are all very important and should be considered. One thing that often goes unlooked at during the selection process is the job superintendent. Most likely (depending scale) the General Contractor will have a representative on site every day. This person is called the job superintendent and his/her role is to be the eyes, ears, and mouth of the Contractor to the sub-contractors. You can have the best General Contractor, Architect, and Building Committee, and a bad superintendent can make the construction phase an awful mess for everyone. Conversely a well-organized, forward-thinking superintendent can make an extremely difficult project a breeze. This is especially true if you will be occupying the site/building during construction. Job superintendents typically do not interview well as this is not a skill set they need. Talk to past clients, make sure the superintendent the General Contractor is proposing has a good track record with similar clients.

