Bringing the Pieces Together

Agency launches a Lunch & Learn Program to unite staff and consultants

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The North Dakota Department of Transportation (NDDOT) Office of Project Development is focused on growing a high-performing team that can confidently overcome tomorrow's infrastructure challenges. As part of its strategic plan, goals were established in the areas of innovation, asset management, safety and service.

In order to achieve these goals, the Environmental and Transportation Services (ETS) Division decided to take action. The three ETS sections, which include Right of Way, Environmental and Consultant Administration Services, recognized the importance of ensuring that the employees and consultants understand how their job impacts others and contributes to the overall project goals. To reinforce the crucial role of teamwork and communication, management created the acronym TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More) to unite the three sections.

The Big Launch

To help us improve our working relationships, the ETS Division came up with the idea of a monthly Lunch & Learn Program and launched our inaugural event on May 20, 2015. The initial event served to introduce the goals of the new program, welcome the consultants, and solicit feedback about what consultants need from NDDOT staff. The kickoff event was a huge success. We had more than 35 attendees at the Bismarck central office with many others attending via video conferencing and by phone from our seven district offices.

As a result of the interactive nature of the program, we now have many topics lined up to improve working relationships with consultants and provide other division employees an opportunity to learn more about the various responsibilities of ETS. For the Right of Way Division, improving accuracy and consistency in documentation and negotiation is a key objective, as well as ensuring that all NDDOT negotiations follow both the Uniform Act and the North Dakota Century Code. Right of way topics planned for the program's first year include handling counteroffers from the landowner, ensuring accurate title work, alternative dispute resolution and the eminent domain process.

The Office of Project Development believes in an interdisciplinary approach to education. It hopes that all staff receives training in the various disciplines of road building so that they have a better understanding of how their tasks contribute to the ultimate goal, which is having a set of plans ready

for bidders. In the coming year, the Consultant Administration Division will present a class on how our bidding process works, while the Environmental Division will address permitting, wetlands and carcass data in wildlife crossings.

Bob Fode, the NDDOT Director of the Office of Project Development, is a strong proponent of continuing education and professional development. "Education helps us better understand our job and leads us to ask questions about our internal processes. This kind of dialogue will generate new ideas and ways of simplifying what we do, while ensuring we are providing our stakeholders with the best possible service," he said.

The Right of Way TEAM has several negotiators who are involved with IRWA Chapter 72 and are taking courses toward their certifications. For the September Lunch & Learn, several

active members of Chapter 72 will present IRWA membership and education information and then host a question/answer segment for consultants. We expect great things from our new program and are thrilled with the enthusiastic response we've received to date.

With support and feedback from our consultants, and help from our outside education providers, we expect the Lunch & Learn Program to build our TEAM effort, meet our goals of consistency and accuracy, encourage professional certification, and assure that all landowners will have an exceptionally good experience during right of way negotiations with the NDDOT. ✪

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