Fulfilling a VISION

Ontario’s Ministry of Transportation leverages partnership opportunities

BY BARBARA BILLITZER
For transportation agencies around the globe, overseeing a complex array of infrastructure projects requires specialized skills and training. Yet, with shrinking budgets and various travel constraints, gaining access to cost-effective education can be a challenge for any organization.

In 2009, IRWA began offering agency agreements as a way to facilitate membership and training opportunities for organizations with a large staff that share similar educational requirements. The U.S. Federal Highway Administration had enjoyed such an agreement with IRWA for several years, and the Association recognized that expanding the program would enable more professionals to take advantage of the program’s membership and training opportunities. To date, IRWA has secured agreements with a diverse range of agencies, utilities and quasi-governmental entities across the United States.

In 2014, IRWA’s Vice President of Field Operations Daniel Stekol began meeting with IRWA’s Canadian Chapters to discuss the benefits available to agencies throughout Canada’s many provinces. The opportunity to establish an agency agreement was brought to the attention of the Ministry of Transportation Ontario (MTO) property staff in Kingston, Ontario. Several MTO professionals were already actively involved in leadership roles with Chapter 63 in Ottawa. After hearing Daniel speak about the agency agreement in late 2014, the group decided to pursue a joint partnership.

According to Daniel, who heads up the program, “Agency agreements are one of the most mutually-beneficial programs we offer, and the interest in them continues to gain traction. If an agency has at least 20 employees and commits to their participation in two or more IRWA courses, the arrangement offers significant cost savings. Once the agency establishes their internal training goals, IRWA works closely with them to ensure their objectives are met.”

In addition to a reduced membership rate, agencies can work with IRWA to develop tailor-made courses that are structured to meet the specific needs of their employees. This is especially valuable when multiple employees require the same type of training. Even the training materials can be crafted to meet the agency’s unique requirements. Courses can also be held on site, alleviating the need for travel and minimizing time away from the office.

An Evolving Relationship
The potential for an agency agreement evolved shortly after Daniel met Chapter 63 President Nancy Sinclair, SR/WA in Ottawa. As MTO’s Head, Property Section Eastern Region, Nancy showed a great deal of interest in the advantages an IRWA agency agreement could provide her organization. She introduced Daniel to several other MTO staff involved in the chapter, including Professional Development Chair John Adams, SR/WA, and Education Chair Steve Biro, SR/WA, to discuss the opportunities for specialized training. Given that MTO spans across multiple regions in Ontario, Nancy recommended bringing in representation from Chapter 29 in Toronto. Robert Piper, SR/WA, who serves as MTO’s Head Office Team Lead, Property became engaged in the discussions and took on an active role in bringing the agency agreement to fruition.

In March 2015, MTO signed a formalized agency agreement, and there are currently 25 employees participating in the program. Upon signing the agreement, Nancy said, “By establishing an agency agreement...
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— Robert Piper, SR/WA
MTO Head Office Team Lead, Property
provincial highway network, including economic benefit and long-term growth needs. The ministry prioritizes its expansion projects taking into consideration such factors as changes in travel time, improvements in safety, economic development, availability of alternate routes, economic benefit and connectivity to transportation modes for moving goods. Integrating provincial and municipal planning and policy priorities, MTO also focuses on facilitating the use of transit.

According to Rob, “We look at new approaches to planning and investing in our transportation infrastructure so that we can stretch taxpayer dollars and maximize value in addressing Ontario’s transportation, economic, social and environmental objectives. We also partner with the private sector for the construction and maintenance of our highways, work with the federal government to develop long-term plans for public infrastructure and use value engineering to enhance our highway projects. There is also an emphasis to apply innovative ideas generated within the ministry to save costs and deliver our highway projects better, safer and faster.”

The ministry annually obtains funding to deliver its highway program from the province’s Consolidated Revenue Fund through the annual business planning process, whereby ministries submit business case rationales for capital infrastructure projects and operational/maintenance budgets to the government’s central agencies. The ministry may also obtain funding for construction projects through federally sponsored programs such as the Building Canada Fund. Qualified projects are eligible for 50 percent of the project value under this program.

Role of Continuing Education
Nancy believes that continuing education is a very important part of the ministry’s efforts to maintain and further develop a workforce that has the knowledge, skills and capacity to support delivery of the provincial highway construction program. “Property acquisition for large highway infrastructure projects is a unique undertaking. The process is guided by legislation, and it often requires considerable knowledge and experience in appraising and negotiating partial takings, and identifying any impacts to remaining lands,” she said.

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MTO Head, Property Section Eastern Region
The acquisition of property for future highway corridors is a complex activity that demands significant technical expertise, and continuing education is essential. It has become a high priority for the ministry staff to have access to the training they need to serve the interests of the government, property owners and members of the public.

Rob believes that by becoming an IRWA agency member, the ministry demonstrates that it values the services provided by the Association and that it has an interest in not only increasing its participation in educational events, but also in having greater influence on the type and location of IRWA course offerings. “While our property staff are not required to have specific designations, those striving to obtain designations or certifications are provided with opportunities to attend courses,” he said.

A Long-Term Commitment

“The 2014 Ontario Budget signaled a long-term commitment to build and renew the province’s infrastructure,” said Nancy. “As a result, the ministry will be expected to deliver some of the largest highway construction programs in the province’s history over the next several years. Timely property acquisition is critical to meeting these expectations.”

While MTO policies, programs and services help to keep Ontario’s transportation network safe and reliable, the ministry focuses on issues like growing traffic congestion, increased urbanization and climate change, all of which put pressure on the province’s transportation system, as well as the environment. Given the breadth and scope of MTO’s mandate, the ministry has a unique opportunity to make a positive difference in Ontario’s economic, social and environmental sustainability.

“MTO has a long and strong tradition of making significant contributions to the quality of life in Ontario. We want to build on this history in shaping the future of our ministry and our province – a future that is sustainable,” Nancy said. “We are pleased to have become IRWA’s first agency partner in Canada, and we plan to maximize the unique training opportunities that this agreement provides.”

Barbara is the Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of Right of Way Magazine.

For more information about IRWA’s Agency Agreement program, please contact Daniel Stekol at stekol@irwaonline.org.