Partnering For Highway Quality
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Football great Rosie Greer said, "You learn a lot of things on the field. But most of all you learn you need those ten other guys." His observation captures the spirit of the partnerships that flourish today in the highway community. Talented men and women from the public and private sectors prove every day that partnering fuels the delivery of high quality roadways and bridges.

This is a subject that rivets the attention of The Associated General Contractors of America (AGC), along with the Federal Highway Administration, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and the ten other leading highway, construction, and engineering organizations that constitute the National Partnership for Highway Quality (NPHQ). We've all signed up to specific meanings of quality, and one speaks volumes about partnering: quality means maximum cooperation between public agencies and private industry to optimize roadway performance for the nation's drivers. Bob Templeton, P.E., the Executive Director of the National Partnership for Highway Quality, adds that "Those drivers — our customers — stand at the partnering-quality nexus. Partnering encourages decision making and problem solving driven by concern for the public."

For AGC and many of the 35,000 firms it represents, partnering is a way of life. It has to be, with so much at stake. The country's highway and bridge infrastructure has an asset value of nearly $1.4 trillion. Each $1 billion spent on building and upgrading the nation's highways has saved about 1,400 lives over the past 40 years as well as billions in health care, insurance and productivity. Every billion dollars in federal highway investment creates the potential for 42,500 new jobs. Highways play a vital role in the overall health of the American economy, since a first class economy hinges on a first class infrastructure. So the processes that deliver safe, high-quality roads and bridges on time and within cost are of national significance. Partnering is one such process.

To some, the term "partnering" brings to mind formal public-private contracts that allow the shifting or sharing of risk and creation of revenue sources to augment core government-financed transportation programs. This kind of public-private partnering can mitigate the effects of what one industry executive has called the "4-Ds": deficits, downsizing, devolution, and deregulation.

But "partnering" also refers to a formal process in which all project stakeholders come together for mutual benefits on a particular project. The partnering charters that guide the process aren't binding contracts, but mutually agreed-upon values and goals. This partnering model is of particular interest to The Associated General Contractors of America and the National Partnership for Highway Quality. I'd like to share some thoughts about it and about some key alliances that AGC has with organizations like the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the American Subcontractors Association. With these agreements we pull up chairs at each others' tables and work closely on issues affecting business, customers, and the common good.

A Process for Shared Responsibility
Archimedes, who proved the Law of the Lever, said "Give me a lever long
enough and a place to stand, and I will
move the earth.” In transportation today,
a worthy place to stand and move the
earth — while leveraging trust, teamwork,
and expertise — is on the bedrock
of the partnering process.

Some state agencies — the Maryland
State Highway Administration and the
Arizona Department of Transportation
among them — regularly hold pre-
partnering meetings and partnering
workshops to hammer out goals and
objectives, responsibilities, and pro-
cesses to track and measure key
performance areas, for issue resolution,
communication, and decision-making.
Some companies, like Sundt, Hensel
Phelps, Granite Construction in
California and others, have institution-
ialized processes for partnering and have
assigned people responsible for the
success of partnering. These are
elements of an enlightened corporate
mindset.

Back in 1991, AGC adapted partnering
guidelines from the Army Corps of
Engineers in order to publish a “how to” for members on successful partnering,
including formulating charters and
gaining stakeholders’ commitment to
common goals. The AGC guidelines
outline the attributes of successful
partnering: the commitment of upper
management; equity, where everyone is
equal and everyone has good ideas; the
nurturing of trust and collegiality;
regular reviews of how well the team is
hitting milestones and reaching results;
issue resolution procedures that
advocate the handling of problems at the
lowest possible level; continuous
communication; and a combined focus
on the customer.

Partnered projects are different from the
handshake arrangements out there where
people agree to agree, but with no
formal process in place. It's far
preferable to have the charter and
accountability process. In AGC's expe-
rience, a charter signed by stakeholders
signals a team partnering to the fullest
extent and committed to mutually
agreed-upon goals. The charter becomes
the heartbeat of the project and its
barometer. AGC members who partner
project in and project out nearly always
rely on the formal approach.

AGC’s Partnering Awards
AGC, in fact, sponsors a yearly awards
program to recognize stellar partnering
efforts. The Marvin M. Black Excel-
lence in Partnering Awards are
presented for successful construction
efforts judged not only on project
ingenuity, size, scope, and final
appearance, but on the nature of the
partnering process. In 2003, ten projects,
including several in transportation, were
singled out for their ability to reach a
common goal, resolve conflicts, boost
communication, and team-build.

Winners included Zachry Construction
Corporation and the Texas Department
of Transportation for the Fort Worth I-
35 W/I-30 Downtown Interchange, also
known as "The Mixmaster." It came in
ahead of schedule, without claims, under
budget, and with an impressive safety
record. Aggressive partnering and a
framework for cooperation sparked
efficiency, momentum and minimal
impacts to the traveling public.

Another example: the Maine Turnpike
Authority (MTA), with Cianbro Corpor-
ation, CPM Constructors, R.J. Grondin
& Sons, Reed & Reed, Inc., and Shaw
Brothers Construction. The project was
the Maine Turnpike Widening and
Modernization, Year III, which involved
seven contracts with separate entities
partnering on each with the MTA. The
Associated General Contractors of
Maine took an active role by jointly
initiating the overall construction
process review workshop for year three
of the widening project. MTA and the
AGC contractors demonstrated their
commitment to safety by authorizing an
additional $500,000 for safety-related
expenditures.
NPHQ's Highway Quality Awards
The quality-managed highway projects honored with National Partnership for Highway Quality awards also accentuate partnering's effects. Examples of recent NPHQ award winners make compelling cases for partnering workshops, agreements, and relationships.

The Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT), contractor Sundt Construction, and designer URS Corporation were 2003 NPHQ Gold Level winners for the US 93-Boulders Reconstruction Project. The Boulders team widened 7.5 miles of the narrow, winding highway through rugged Mohave Desert terrain from a two-lane roadway to a four-lane divided highway and flattened curves to create a safer road. US 93 is a designated scenic route that cuts diagonally across northwest Arizona from metropolitan Phoenix to I-40 east of Kingman.

The state and Sundt, along with representatives from the Federal Highway Administration, URS Corporation, the Bureau of Land Management, the Department of Public Safety, and multiple subcontractors kicked off the project with a professionally facilitated partnering workshop. Forty-seven participants from 15 stakeholder groups set goals for quality, communication, issue resolution, team relationships, schedule, safety, environmental protection, and budget. They held monthly evaluations and scored themselves on each goal on a scale from 1 to 4. ADOT follows a similar partnering process on all its construction projects.

The Boulders team also implemented a broad public communication plan to keep customers in the loop. They had identified its customers very early on and designed communication strategies to engage them throughout reconstruction. They distributed newsletters, construction alerts, magazine articles, TV public service announcements, and newspaper ads to keep the public informed about traffic impacts. News media had regular briefings, tours and press releases. Even an individual motorist who complained about a long road closure received a letter from the Resident Engineer detailing corrective action to minimize inconvenience.

The team finished the $16.3 million effort 8 months ahead of schedule. To make that happen, some crews worked double shifts on one of the deadliest sections of roadway in the state. There were no major accidents caused by construction zone restrictions or closures, and the number of severe highway accidents has dropped since.

And another example: Kentucky. Partnering broke a 20-year deadlock over the widening of Paris Pike, the four-lane 12 1/2 mile stretch of US 68/US 27 from Lexington to Paris, Ky. It winds through the state's scenic and historically rich countryside, and had been the subject of a two-decade court injunction resulting from public controversy over reconstruction. The impasse ended when the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) created a consortium of engineers; landscape architects; historic preservationists; scenic road specialists; citizen advisory groups; and federal, state, county, and city representatives willing to work shoulder to shoulder.

The KYTC and its designer-contractor teammates won the 2003 NPHQ State Winner Award for their accomplishments. As NPHQ's Bob Templeton puts it, "People came together in the name of quality to decide how two additional lanes could fit naturally into the landscape and respect property, the Bluegrass countryside, and history, then made it happen."

It wasn't standard practice for the state to ally with historic preservationists and masons skilled in dry-laying rock fences. But they wanted to return the landscape to its original appearance and joined forces to that end. Kentucky, in
fact, is about to do it again as the KYTC creates more unprecedented partnerships for the Newtown Pike Extension and the urban development windfall to spring from the project.

**AGC Alliances**
These are just a few instances of the outstanding cooperative ventures that play out every day among transportation agencies, non-profits, historical societies, utilities, contractors, designers, suppliers, associations, communities, and other stakeholders. Another kind of partnership joins AGC itself with other organizations and associations with shared interests. These are unique agreements to promote viable solutions to industry challenges.

Just last year AGC entered into a partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency to work much more closely on issues of mutual interest. As the voice of the construction industry, AGC will help EPA understand the construction process, encourage open dialogues with industry stakeholders, help plan initiatives, publicize new compliance assistance tools, and align environment programs with industry needs. It underscores EPA's commitment to assist the industry in reaching compliance with regulations and AGC members' commitment to comply.

Another, with the American Subcontractors Association (ASA), pledges to work jointly on industry guidelines, documents and procedures that advance project delivery and equitable risk allocation. AGC and ASA have opened new lines of communications at all levels with this agreement.

Other partnerships link AGC with the National Partnership for Highway Quality, of course, and the Army Corps of Engineers, the Naval Facilities Engineering Command, OSHA and others in long-term relationships. The point is to create together an infrastructure that supports the building and mobility needs of the public and is grounded in quality.

**The Deployment of Quality**
Any discussion of partnering returns to quality. A founding father of the quality movement, W. Edwards Deming, proposed that the majority of quality problems are caused by the system; far fewer are caused by people. Process- and system-improving solutions can elevate quality, and partnering is one such tool.

The deployment of quality principles throughout organizations and projects denotes the primacy of customer satisfaction and teamwork. The deployment will carry special weight in a dynamic era shaped by TEA-21 reauthorization, the "4-Ds," and our enduring mandate to keep America's highways and bridges in solid, safe shape for the customer.

Retired Admiral Bobby Inman once wrote in the Wall Street Journal that America's strengths include "great entrepreneurial drive, a flexible form of government, and mobility of ideas and people." These strengths clearly merge in the highway community, and most prominently in the concept and reality of partnering.