Reworking Public Works

In the face of negative public perception and countless stalled infrastructure projects, American City & County’s 2016 Public Works Leader of the Year, Shane Silsby, turned an inefficient department into a finely tuned machine.

By Derek Prall
When Shane Silsby walked into the Orange County, Calif., Public Works offices for his interview, his now-boss, the County’s Chief Operating Officer, Mark Denny, was immediately impressed.

According to Denny, Shane was clearly detail-oriented and had done his homework. He expressed a keen interest in the best practices of public works, showed an enthusiasm for the work itself and demonstrated a vast knowledge of public works’ different disciplines. However, one situation particularly stood out to Denny. “While Shane was waiting [for his interview], he saw one of our custodial staff, and he spent time with them asking them about their work,” Denny says. “Here’s a line-level custodian, and he’s sitting there asking questions, getting input from this person, so he could better understand the department’s functions, the county’s dynamics... that’s just something you don’t often see.”

After a rigorous national search, Silsby was ultimately selected to take the reins in November 2013. He manages over 900 employees and a budget of $465 million.

However, taking charge of Orange County’s Public Works was no easy task. For years, the department had endured negative media attention, suffered from a constantly bruised reputation and worked off of a budget that lacked a progressive financial strategy. On top of that, the department’s organizational structure was overly complex, leading to countless stalled or half-realized infrastructure projects.

Silsby clearly had work to do. From day one, he says he had three main goals: to improve employee morale, to improve the overall efficiency of the department and to enhance customer service.

However, to really understand how Silsby was able to accomplish these goals, it’s important to understand where he came from.

A WIDE BREADTH OF PUBLIC WORKS EXPERIENCE

Like many young people, Silsby took an aptitude test in high school that, due to his keen interest in math and science, told him he would excel in the civil engineering field. He went on to major in civil engineering at Michigan State, eventually earning a master’s degree in civil transportation from the same institution.

During grad school, Silsby interned with the city government of Lansing, Mich., and was given a full-time staff position upon graduation. “I worked there for about five years, and when I left I was the chief administrator of the transportation and parking office,” he says.

However, Silsby and his new wife were not fans of the cold Michigan winters, and decided to seek warmer climates. “We ended up in Phoenix, where I spent a little over 9 years doing traffic engineering and leading a development team for the downtown area.”

Orange County, however, was alluring. Not only would it be a good career move, but it looked like an interesting challenge. “It was a promotion, but it was also a span over all the disciplines I had dealt with in my career to that point,” Silsby says. “It was like a capstone position to deal with transportation, buildings, parking, planning – all these different things – in one position.”

Silsby says people are often surprised at the ease with which he’s able to transition between the disciplines of public works. “I had to deal with a lot of different things over my career, with the different positions and special projects I worked on,” he says.

Because of this broad experience, Silsby says he is not only able to tell when he’s being bluff ed, but he can also be engaged and be a participant in the
conversation, actively helping to find solutions when anyone runs into a problem. And it’s this ability that helped Silsby take a faltering department and make it succeed.

RESTRICTURING AN INEFFICIENT DEPARTMENT

Before his first day, Shane called in a maintenance team to work on his office doors. The doors, according to Denny, were solid, made of heavy material, and closed him off from the rest of the floor. “He called up the Fac. Ops. guys and said ‘Hey, I want you to take those doors down, and I want you to cut holes in them and install glass.’ He wanted to make sure his office was open and transparent to anyone that walked by.”

Denny says this exemplifies Silsby’s leadership style. He takes charge to get things done, while maintaining an openness and transparency that is enviable in high-ranking officials. It was with this leadership style that Silsby approached the momentous undertaking of restructuring his inefficient, lumbering department. In 2014, Silsby began planning the department’s overhaul, and in June of that year, the Board of Supervisors approved the plan. By 2015, the initiative was underway.

During the staggering process, staff was moved, new organizational structures were conceptualized, office space was reimagined and budgetary resources were reallocated. In all, over 200 positions were re-assigned, 60 redundant positions were removed and 50 positions were reclassified, all the while ensuring not a single member of staff lost their job.

Due to this restructuring, Silsby says the public works department was able to complete 25 years’ worth of human resources work within six months’ time. The restructuring produced a cost savings to the county of $21 million annually, reducing operating costs from $33 million to $12 million. “That was huge,” says Silsby. “It really broke open the process of how we were going to manage the organization.”

Of the changes that occurred during the restructuring, Steve Franks, the director of Orange County Community Resources, who works closely with Silsby, says that one of the biggest concerns across the board has always been cost effectiveness and the ability to meet deadlines. “In a nutshell, Shane has brought forth accountability and transparency
to that process,” he says. “Shane worked on the culture there so that there was more accountability and a stronger communication factor.”

However, the benefits of restructuring the department weren’t limited to finances. Due to improved efficiencies and clear career paths for employees, morale increased and productivity improved. Of this, Denny says “He’s really sought to bring everybody into the team, to understand what their goals are, what their objectives are and how they’re getting results.”

In measuring these boosts in morale, Silsby has utilized employee engagement surveys to determine how connected his employees feel to their work. “To get at the morale issues, I did a survey when I first got here,” he says. “I asked them how we can improve morale, how we can increase efficiencies and how we can improve customer service.” On the first survey, Silsby received 226 responses out of 900 total employees. It wasn’t a hugely impressive response rate, but enough to get a decent idea of how employees felt. However, Silsby says, “Once we started establishing trust, the next time we did the survey – about 18 months later – we had a 60 percent response rate. This told me there was some trust being developed and some engagement being developed.”

However, the restructuring wasn’t without its opponents. Change is always difficult, and sometimes it’s difficult to get stakeholders on board, both internally and externally.

Communication was key in establishing support, Silsby says. “We had 50 meetings with all the groups and sub groups, and we talked about what came out of the survey and why we were making these changes.” Addressing the question of “why,” Silsby says, was the best way to ensure support of the transition.

One thing Franks has since noticed about Silsby’s influence is that the reorganized department has become more focused on customer service – one of Silsby’s initial goals when he first took charge. Franks explains: “When you start a project you can say ‘we’re going to get it done, and we’re going to get it done on time’ and you can end up disregarding what the customer wants, or you can do it in a way where you understand what the need is... it’s really important that the infrastructure, design and building of something has to include what the programmatic needs are. Shane has a grasp of that, and he’s done a good job of trying to instill that.”

He adds that under Silsby’s leadership, Public Works in the county is no longer a “nuts and bolts” operation. “It’s not get the shovels in the ground, build to the specs and get it all done; it’s [now important] that we’re considering the needs of the customer, because they are the ultimate users.”

Because of this shifting of priorities, as well as the improved efficiencies of the reorganized department, Silsby and his team have been able to break ground on several new public works projects, including the largest county-sponsored road project in the community’s history.

BREAKING NEW GROUND

“One of the things that really attracted us to Shane was his knowledge and interest in pursuing alternative delivery methods,” Denny says. “These methods bring projects in faster with fewer change orders and lower costs.” Silsby is actively looking at these methods – such as design/build and construction-manager-at-risk-models – that historically county public works has not been engaged in, but by thinking outside the box, the number of projects the county has undertaken in his short tenure has been impressive.

In spring of 2014, the public works department broke ground on one of the largest road projects in the county’s history – the 60-year-stalled La Pata Gap Closure Project. Simply referred to as La Pata, the project was designed to complete planned improvements that were identified in the county’s master plan back in 1956.

The La Pata project creates an arterial alternative through the county - alleviating traffic and assuaging
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An overhead view of the La Pata Avenue Gap Closure Project. The undertaking, more than 60 years in the making, connects two Orange County cities, assuaging traffic issues and lessening environmental impacts.

the negative environmental impacts associated with it, Silsby says. “It’s roughly a $127 million project, and we’re scheduled to open the gap portion of it later in August. That’s a huge milestone for the county.”

The project was a massive undertaking and involved moving 14.8 million cubic yards of earth and laying 117,828 tons of asphalt. However, that wasn’t necessarily the most difficult part. Collaboration between multiple county departments, cities, third-party agencies and utility companies was required to make the project a success. Under Silsby’s leadership, the project moved ahead of schedule, and its ribbon was cut on Aug. 19.

The long-anticipated animal care facility is another important project Silsby spearheaded. “The county provides regional services for animal care, and the existing facility was built in 1941,” Silsby says. “So about 75 years in the making. The joke I’ve been telling people is that this is the Halley’s Comet of groundbreakings.”

Initiated earlier this month, from the start, the project was complicated. There were multiple facets to consider, and numerous details to keep organized. There was a major land-swap leasing deal that had to be arranged through a third-party real estate group, getting 14 cities on board to fund the project, and putting out an RFP for an accelerated design-build project.

By using this unique delivery method, Silsby says they were able to cut almost a year out of the project’s timeline while maintaining the budget set earlier in the year. “This is a huge project the county has been looking to do,” he says.

In addition to these two projects, the county is also revitalizing its harbor, expanding its jail, upgrading its power plant and constructing a new public services building. Silsby refers to these projects as the “Infrastructure Big Six.” In total, “This is over $600 million worth of projects going on in the county right now,” he says.

SILSBY’S LEADERSHIP

On Silsby’s leadership, Franks says he is most impressed with his level of personal engagement and tenacity in problem-solving. “I know if there’s an issue, he’s the first to call – I hear from him right away.” Franks adds that this attitude isn’t limited to office hours, either. Silsby is available 24 hours a day, and will often handle issues as they arise, even well into the night.
Silsby’s involvement with a problem also brings with it reassurance, Franks says. “I know when he’s engaged with a problem, that he’s already looked at the issue and actively perusing solutions. I’m confident that his engagement means the problem will soon be solved.”

Franks is reminded of one instance where Silsby’s leadership skills shone – the recent planning and development of the Animal Care Center. Despite numerous complications during the planning process, Franks says Silsby maintained clarity and organization through transparency and open lines of communication with all involved parties.

Additionally, the design-build delivery method of the project was new for the county. “This is no small feat for him,” Franks says. “A design-build was a new territory for the county. For him to be able to pull that off with his people and get that through was a real significant accomplishment.” He adds, “It’s one thing to do something new, but it’s another thing to do it on an expedited time line and do it in sync with everyone else.”

Denny feels many of Silsby’s leadership characteristics come from his time as a collegiate athlete. “He played basketball in college, and what that speaks to is preparation, a willingness to work hard, and a drive for results.”

While Silsby’s drive and attention to detail is impressive, his ability to consider numerous viewpoints has also impressed his colleagues. “Unlike most managers in executive positions at this level, Shane is a very effective and focused listener,” says Mike Recupero, an attorney that has worked closely with Silsby on many county projects. “He listens first and discusses his reasoning in detail rather than just ‘talking.’ He brings very little ego to the table, which minimizes the need to deal with both an issue and an ego on the other side.”

This humility was exemplified in the process of writing this story, in fact. When presented with the Public Works Leader of the Year Award, Silsby expressed a strong desire to give credit to his family, his co-workers and his colleagues. He wished to close with the following acknowledgements.

“I would like to acknowledge my family for their understanding during the times that I work late, head to the office on the weekends, or review documents at home. I would like to acknowledge the County Executive’s Office and the Board of Supervisors for their trust in OC Public Works as we proposed and implemented numerous difficult initiatives, many of which included major changes to past practices or policies. And finally, I would like to thank the entire OC Public Works team for their willingness to work hard and to have faith in the new processes and procedures that have had some level of impact on every employee. Changing culture is not easy and the employees have remained focused on continuous improvement.”