

Robert Hofmann: An Introduction

Robert Hofmann has been hired as the Project Director for the West Lincoln Memorial Hospital's new building project and he starts full-time with his new responsibilities on April 1, 2010

Can you tell us a little of your background?

I was born and raised in Owen Sound, just a couple hours north of the Niagara Region. I left to go to school in Toronto at Ryerson's architectural program and graduated in 1994. I originally lived in Toronto and worked on a number of different projects. My first big assignment was with Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto. I spent five years there, completing a number of build projects, including the building of a clinical services wing and an addition and re-build to the cancer centre.

I then spent a year in Ottawa, with a project management company building for Nortel. Those were the days when Nortel was at its peak and it was throwing up buildings as fast as it could. So, in one year, we completed two lab buildings – 250,000 to 300,000 square foot apiece. That was from functional program to walking the people into the front door. So, it was pretty impressive to watch buildings go up that quickly.

Since then, I worked a year-and-a-half on the Thunder Bay Regional Hospital project. I did a year's work in Sarnia at Bluewater Health, assisting with furniture and equipment planning. The last project assignment has been up in northern Ontario, in Sudbury.

Can you tell us about the Sudbury hospital project?

The decision was made years ago that the City's three hospital sites would amalgamate to one – and the Sudbury hospital would build an addition and renovation to its Laurentian site. This project initially started in 1997 and then it ran into some financial difficulties. As it happened, it was halted by the Ministry of Health.

So, when I came on board in 2004, it was just starting up again. The hospital had to re-scope and redesign the functional program so that they could get approval from the Ministry to resume the project. Under tight scrutiny from the Ministry of Health and from Infrastructure Ontario, I managed the design stage of Phase 2 (the re-start of the project) through to the substantial completion of construction at the end of October '09, a full month ahead of the contract schedule. The cost was \$227 million and we finished on budget. In January, the hospital staff moved in one of the first Sudbury hospitals and, at the end of March, we are moving in the other.

Can you relate what it was like in Sudbury to work with Infrastructure Ontario (I.O.), something you will need to do here at WLMH?

In Sudbury, Infrastructure Ontario was a brand new organization, just starting up, and they first came to us when our design stage was about 90% complete. We were working on contract documents, finishing specifications and trying to move the project closer to tender. At that point, I.O. was helpful in driving the process, assisting us in getting our project to tender.

Since they first started, Infrastructure Ontario has developed a lot of very good policies around the tendering stage or the procurement stage, as they call it. I have quite a bit of familiarity with their policies and senior officials. Now, with WLMH's project, we are told that it is supposed to be a Design-Build-Finance-Maintenance project. One of the things I am most looking forward to with WLMH's project is getting involved in I.O.'s DBFM process to get us to our construction phase.

What did you find challenging with the Sudbury project?

Our greatest challenge on the construction side of the Sudbury project was the interaction with the occupied hospital. So, in this case we had a bunch of renovation projects - renovation inside the hospital; and, we were tying a brand new wing directly onto the existing hospital. Infection control becomes a big concern with hospitals and we spent a lot of time and effort trying to maintain infection control practices and procedures and looking to patient and staff safety while we were building.

This experience will help with some of the construction challenges at WLMH. The placement of the new WLMH is being built directly adjacent to the existing one. So, there will be challenges getting construction vehicles and materials off and on the site. Both access and infection control will be issues. With infection control, health officials are trying to identify infectious materials more so from the outside moving in. I also see safety issues that we are going have to consider...

What do you like most about your job?

Everyday turns out to be something different. Even seasoned veterans in the construction, planning and architectural industries will tell you that there are always new challenges to be faced. You never have all the answers no matter how long you've been at it. So, there are always new things coming up that no one else has had to deal with and, for me, solving these issues is particularly satisfying.

What do you see as your first steps when you arrive in Grimsby?

First, I will want to begin introducing myself to all parties concerned with the project: hospital staff and the people and volunteers that play a part within the hospital, the community leaders who support this project so wholeheartedly, as well as Ministry officials. I want to spend time and familiarize myself with the staff and management and understand the operations at West Lincoln.

At the same time, we have submitted the functional program to the Ministry of Health so there will be some back-and-forth in getting that approved. The Ministry is going to have questions and I want to be able to anticipate the issues and be the contact person for them. It's important to drive the functional program approval process, in an attempt to keep things rolling to get to design phase as quickly as possible.

What are your personal thoughts as you come into your new position at WLMH?

I am very excited to starting this project and looking forward to focusing on this new challenge. I know the community has been looking for this project to get started for some time now. I have been introduced to some of the volunteers in the coffee shop and the most asked question is simply, "When is our new hospital going to be built?" I appreciate this community perspective. Sudbury was in the same boat when I arrived on the scene – they actually had a project that was stopped half way through and had a six-story patient tower that was sitting empty. There was a tremendous community concern and focus on getting the project going in Sudbury, as there is here today. It is something that I have been through, I'm accustomed to, and I look forward to assisting WLMH and the community in getting this project underway.