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Innovation Trends

Local government teams are embracing change by introducing new and innovative projects



	TYL division	FRI division
264	558	254
274	154	415
650	320	273
825	154	
144	954	174
50	874	57
145	712	752
741	741	345
84	954	41
		741
		345

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Innovation Trends



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Local government teams are embracing change by introducing new and innovative projects

By Tammy Rimes, MPA

Government is not always recognized for its innovation. As customer needs evolve and new challenges present themselves, teams are embracing change and leading new projects to address local issues as well as world-wide problems.

PILOT PROJECTS PROMOTE INNOVATION

The Port of San Diego (Port) is a self-supporting special district that manages 34 miles of waterfront along San Diego Bay (Bay) and approximately 11,600 acres of submerged tidelands, with a mission to promote commerce, navigation, recreation and environmental stewardship. The Bay is home to 800 maritime, tourism, hospitality, water and blue technology businesses, generating a statewide economic impact of \$24.5 billion and providing more than 130,000 jobs in California and 64,000 jobs in San Diego County.

Through an innovative initiative, the Aquaculture and Blue Technology Program was established to create growth opportunities for the blue economy sector. In 2016 the Port launched its Blue Economy Incubator (BEI) to build a portfolio of businesses and partnerships to deliver multiple social, environmental and economic co-benefits to the Port.

To date, nine agreements have been approved with early-stage companies, including one re-investment, to launch innovative pilot projects, four of which have been completed. Proposals to work sustainably within the marine environment can come from anywhere. The best ideas transition into concepts, design plans and then prototypes. After testing and validation is completed within a lab setting, the technology is deployed in a real-world setting. That's when the Port's BEI plays a unique role to help emerging businesses deploy their products and services by removing barriers, providing funding, and supporting services such as permit assistance and pilot project facilitation.

One BEI project is Sunken Seaweed, an aquaculture start-up company led by two marine ecologists to demonstrate the feasibility of seaweed aquaculture. Establishing a seaweed hatchery at San Diego State University's Coastal and Marine Institute Laboratory, the submerged pilot farm was installed using Port assets, such as docks and piers. Since 2018, the company has successfully cultivated, monitored and harvested several species of seaweed native to Southern California. Beyond commercialization, results from the pilot project assess and quantify seaweed aquaculture's multiple co-benefits, from carbon sequestration and bioremediation to

improving water quality and ecosystem productivity. In 2022, the Port reinvested in an expansion of Sunken Seaweed's pilot, while expanding operations to Humboldt Bay.

In another successful project, ecoSPEARS partnered with the Port to demonstrate its innovative technology to extract contaminants from impacted marine sediment. ecoSPEARS is the exclusive licensee of National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)-patented SPEARS technology, which was invented by a team of NASA environmental scientists as a green remediation solution to extract contaminants. The pilot deployed more than 450 ecoSPEARS units in three different locations around the Bay. In December 2022, ecoSPEARS retrieved their SPEARS, and studies are being conducted to measure the mass of



Sunken Seaweed is an aquaculture start-up company led by two marine ecologists to demonstrate the feasibility of seaweed aquaculture in the San Diego Bay.

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) collected in them.

In exchange for funding or support provided to launch the nine pilot projects, the Port receives a royalty payment from the businesses' operations or technology. To date, the Port has committed \$1.7 million in funding, provided use of Port-owned property, assisted with obtaining regulatory and operational permits, coordinated the installation of the projects, and helped with community and media relations.

"Through the Blue Economy Incubator, the Port of San Diego has received global attention, and we'll continue to pave the way for new projects that protect and preserve precious

IN DEPTH [looking ahead]

resources not just here locally but all over the world,” says Chairman Rafael Castellanos, Port of San Diego Board of Port Commissioners. “We are committed to continuing this work and putting San Diego Bay on the map as the Blue Tech Bay.”

USING TECHNOLOGY IN NEW WAYS

With increasing interest in artificial intelligence (AI), procurement teams are exploring ways where technology can be incorporated into common work processes. Tasks that may benefit include workflow automation, approving small purchases three-way match invoice processing, Chat bots on websites and data entry.

Zac Christensen, deputy chief cooperative procurement



The Zone in Mount Prospect Ill., is an example of how using cooperative contracting for construction projects has become a trend. (Photo courtesy of The Garland Company)

officer for the National Association of State Procurement Officials, also served as the senior director of procurement and supply chain for the University of Utah and describes how AI was brought in to help staff. “It started with a resource issue as the university accounts payable team lost almost a third of its workforce through promotions and personnel moves. To fill that gap, we explored how AI might assist with manually intensive review processes.”

The first project was to have AI review a three-way match amongst an issued purchase order, with the ultimate invoice and packaging slip. Good accounting requires all deliveries to be checked to ensure contracted pricing and specifications. For many organizations, that in-depth review does not always occur. With an automated system performing reviews, payments can be made quickly for those that match up, with exceptions flagged for human review.

The next project was to have AI assist with their travel system and P-card activities. “The university had thousands of P-card holders and needed a team to run the program,”

Christensen says. “Working with other universities, we learned some used technology to review new card requests or change requests to existing cards (change amounts temporarily, add codes, etc.). If the request was within certain parameters, it automatically was approved and processed.”

Working with a consultant, more than four months of past data was reviewed to determine trends, appropriate charge categories and highlight areas that might need to be flagged. “Having a system perform mini audits on a 7/24 basis allowed our entity to quickly flag anomalies or inaccuracies and bring forward for review,” he says. “For items that were ultimately approved, the system ‘learns’ that purchase is acceptable in the future.”

In the area of cybersecurity, ransomware attacks continue across government and educational institutions on an almost daily basis. According to Info-Tech Research Group, 63 percent of organizations expect to spend more on cybersecurity in 2024.

A leading school district in northern New Mexico with nearly 2,000 students across seven campuses was not equipped to manage its aging network. When the school district suffered a ransomware attack, causing lost data and vulnerability, school management knew it needed a more robust IT infrastructure to help mitigate the risk of another cyberattack.

Reaching out for assistance from Sharp Business Systems (SBS) New Mexico, the district updated equipment, monitored servers, created group policies for simpler and more secure management, and implemented Fortify security software to prevent security vulnerabilities. ConnectWise Manage Help Desk was added to all teachers’ devices to provide additional service support with a dedicated full-time resource for on-site assistance. A new dashboard was introduced that integrated information from multiple sources and applications into a single location to provide full transparency into the district’s IT infrastructure.

Erica Calise, director of marketing, government and national accounts shares, “We have seen an increase in the use of technology and innovation, with an increased demand for certain products such as LCD Displays and AQUOS BOARD collaboration displays in both the government and education markets. The single USB-C connector is becoming a requirement as it is simple to walk into a room, plug in your device and start collaborating.”

RECONFIGURING THE FUTURE OFFICE

To address changing technology and telework schedules, many government and educational institutions are transforming conventional office space to serve future needs.

OFS is a family-owned contract furniture manufacturer that provides furniture and logistics solutions for companies, health care, education and governments. “A well-designed workplace can feel like a very sophisticated tool compared to yesterday’s cube farm,” says Doug Shapiro, OFS vice president

of research and insights. “Investing in change management and communicating the purpose behind new space concepts help users better understand how to get the most out of any new space. Adapting both the space and ways to engage could make the difference in creating a more creative workforce.”

Steelcase is the manufacturer of furniture, seating, and desk systems for offices, hospitals and classrooms. The company’s WorkSpace Futures researchers conducted a recent study in 11 countries where leaders rank employee wellbeing, sustainability and diversity, equity, and inclusion as top workplace issues for the coming year. This research identified issues experienced by navigating telework and a hybrid workforce:

- > 56 percent of meetings are now hybrid and employees find these experiences unsatisfactory across the board, citing spaces that are too small, uncomfortable or lack privacy. (Steelcase Global research)
- > Back-to-back virtual meetings can cause fatigue due to constant eye contact, limited movement and difficulty in interpreting non-verbal cues. (Stanford University)
- > 66 percent of leaders are considering redesigning spaces for hybrid work (Microsoft)

A traditional conference room is designed for in-person attendees, and usually comprised of a long rectangular table with a monitor on the short wall. People in the room must turn to see the screen and end up looking at the back of each other’s heads, leaning in to be seen by remote colleagues. For a virtual participant, it is difficult to read facial expressions or body language, and poor lighting or less-than-ideal acoustics creates a frustrating virtual experience.

To address this growing need, Steelcase collaborates with technology partners Microsoft, Zoom, Logitech and Crestron to develop hybrid best practices. It suggests these ideas to improve a meeting experience for all participants:

- > Seating in arcs or orienting everyone to face the camera improves communication, eye contact and focus.
- > Center the camera to ensure everyone is in the field of view. In open spaces, position the camera to avoid views of aisles, corridors or adjacent co-workers that can be distracting.
- > Fabric wall treatments, panels, carpet and softer seating help absorb sound. In noisy areas, use microphones with noise suppression and consider secondary microphones in larger settings.
- > Provide multi-faceted lighting of the space, people and background. Multi-directional lighting avoids harsh shadows. Lighter colored surfaces promote light distribution and diffused lighting is preferred over direct downlights.

COOPERATIVES OFFER VARIED SOLUTIONS

GovWin IQ from Deltek is an industry-leading platform providing comprehensive market intelligence for U.S. federal, state, local and Canadian governments. Its October 2023 report, SLED Cooperative Purchasing Market Landscape,

shares that the use of cooperative contracts is growing across North America, with exponential growth in the billions of dollars.

With short-staffed departments, there aren’t enough resources to issue a bid for every expiring contract. The growing array of available cooperative contracts offers some relief. Paul Irby, manager of GovWin’s SLED market analysis team, explains that “We have seen cooperative purchasing shift from an emerging trend to more of a mainstream tool for efficient procurement across the SLED (state, local and education) landscape. It enables governments to access a streamlined process to better achieve their operational mission with greater convenience and less risk.”

While cooperative contracting has been used for decades to purchase commodities and services, using these contracts for construction has become the latest trend. Such was the case for a building generically known as “550” within an industrial park in Mount Prospect, Ill. While the River Trails Park District (RTPD) acquired the facility in 2003, it would take 12 years before the building would find new life as “The Zone,” an indoor athletic training center.

RTPD Facility Manager Tom Kearns recognized that before the facility received an aesthetic facelift, it required structural work. “A coat of paint wasn’t going to solve our problems, as there were cracks throughout the façade. Work on the building envelop was needed before giving The Zone the look we wanted to ultimately achieve.” To work quickly, Kearns researched cooperative contracts and contacted The Garland Company, through its OMNIA Partners contract.

Garland/DBS Inc. is a leading manufacturer and distributor of high-performance solutions for commercial buildings, and its Tuff-Coat acrylic wall coating checked all the boxes for The Zone, exceeding RTPD’s expectations. “It’s amazing that this facility was in our portfolio for almost 20 years, it now feels and looks brand new..,” Kearns says.

Doug Looney, senior vice president for OMNIA Partners, public sector concludes, “Many contract offerings are based on the growing needs of local government and educational participants. As entities leverage the value of these contracts, they continue to request more support. There is a growing need for synergies beyond the national level to the local level, particularly with construction and installation services that incorporate local contractors to perform the work.”

TAMMY RIMES, MPA, is the executive director of the National Cooperative Procurement Partners (NCPP). She formally served as purchasing agent for the city of San Diego, the ninth largest city in the nation, and emergency logistics chief during the 2007 Witch Creek Fires. Under her leadership, the city consolidated its warehouse operations, centralized all purchasing and contracting operations, and moved to a more customer focused approach.