

FACE TO FACE

Cynthia Robertson is positive on partnering

by Peter McCreath

Public-private partnering (P3) spans everything from building bridges, like the Confederation Bridge linking New Brunswick and PEI, to toll highways, schools and water treatment plants.

P3 is the means whereby, without calling directly upon the taxpayer, governments are able to provide infrastructure and services by engaging private sector companies to build or develop in cooperation with government.

“Today, we are seeing more and more demands from the public for more and better services. At the same time, our governments are under pressure to cost less and make fewer demands of the taxpayer,” says Cynthia Robertson. “The answer is public-private partnering.” Robertson is the recently elected and newly installed president of the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships. “As we get better at managing P3s, I believe we will see more and more services and infrastructure provided this way.”

This is good news for people like the dynamic and outgoing Cynthia Robertson, who, in her day job, is vice president of government relations at Corporate Communications Limited. As part of the CCL Group, Corporate Communications is one of Atlantic Canada’s largest and one of Canada’s fastest growing and most dynamic full-service communications companies.

“P3 has created a new industry, and it has also created a need for a new service,” Robertson says, “because the private and public sectors don’t always speak the same language. Quite simply, the two have different priorities and, sometimes, perceptions. For example, some people have an inherent distrust of the private sector being involved in public sector infrastructure development. They think that the private sector people are just there to make a quick buck off the taxpayer.”

“As a government relations specialist, my role is to work with companies to help them to improve their relationship with government or, at the very least, to help them find their way through the red tape,” Robertson says.

“When potential clients first come to me, I start by having an assessment meeting with them – to get to know them, and them me – and to determine if there is something we can do for them. I tell them right from the beginning that the role of a GR [government relations] consultant is to

create a win-win scenario – that is, one that must work for the government too if it is going to be a real win for the client.”

Robertson sees every new client as a fresh challenge, as well as an opportunity. “Every new client means a learning curve. You have to learn enough about the industry and the client, including their interests and issues, to be able to represent them effectively. You have to know what the hot buttons are. Obviously, it’s a lot easier, and you can be more effective, if you have an ongoing relationship with the client.”

GR consultants respond to a variety of needs that clients may have, including working to influence legislative or regulatory decisions, seeking business opportunities or looking to sell to the government. They generally provide strategic advice on how government works and makes decisions, and about the environment within which government decision-makers, both political and bureaucratic, make their decisions.

Robertson is well prepared to offer such advice. She spent 13 years in the public service of the Province of Nova Scotia, in increasingly senior positions, in various departments including Agriculture and Marketing, Business and Consumer Services and, for the longest period of her career, the former Civil Service Commission (now the Human Resources Department). A life-long Haligonian, Robertson joined the Bank of Nova Scotia after completing a degree in Political Science at Dalhousie University. After two years of banking, she returned to the university for an MBA, then became a product manager for the well-known Maritime food company, Schwartz Inc. From there, she joined the Nova Scotia civil service. She is a wife and mother, with sons 15 and 11 and an 8-year old daughter.

Robertson had been “having a ball” in the public service when, out of the blue, she was recruited by CCL. She joined them in December 1997. “Some see government as a place that’s bound by rules,” she says. “I saw it as a place where there were a lot of rules not written down. That’s where I operated and I had a ball doing it. Now I’m having a ball where I am. It’s just different.”

Aren’t GR consultants usually ex-politicos? Not so, she says, you’ll find just as many ex-bureaucrats. The first step is always to identify where the decision that is of interest to your client is going to be made. It is essential to be able to work with both politicians and the bureaucrats and, regardless, to keep them both in the loop of what’s going on.

Robertson sees P3 as a growing force in the future. While relatively new in Canada, it is a well-established process in other countries, including France, the UK and the US. “In each country, there is a different perception of what the sacred services are that must be delivered by the government,” she says. P3 is an alternative to privatization and, in some ways, a more desirable option. “Unlike the old system, where a contractor builds a school or road and then leaves, under P3, the partner stays involved, perhaps operating the facility. So they have a vested interest in making sure it is well built! In the end, you get the best product.” The concept is already being applied to the development and operation of software systems, as well as to infrastructure development.

The Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships was established in 1993 by a group of professionals in Toronto, who saw a need for an organization which could draw upon the expertise and bring together members from both the public and private sectors. A non-partisan group, their common interest is a commitment to the concept of P3. The Council has a permanent staff of two in its Toronto office, and is run by an elected Board and Executive. The inspiration for the organization is Chairman of the Board, former federal minister, Royal Commissioner and Canadian High Commissioner to the UK, Donald Macdonald. Robertson heads the volunteer executive, the first person from outside Toronto to hold the office. She was elected last November for a one-year term – though her predecessors have generally served two terms.

On June 8-9, 1999, the Council is partnering in a regional conference in Atlantic Canada at Halifax' World Trade and Convention Centre. Conference volunteer Sara Filbee of CIBC Commercial Banking says response to the conference has been excellent. "Exciting things are happening in P3 in Atlantic Canada, and thanks to Cynthia's leadership, the conference will be a terrific event. We expect about 300 to attend."

Cynthia Robertson looks forward to the conference with her usual degree of enthusiasm. "It will be a great opportunity to meet people and hear from some of the leaders in the industry."

For Roberston, the conference is the latest in a life-long series of challenges and adventures met and accomplished. She served as VP of Symphony Nova Scotia, raises money for the United Way and the Mermaid Theatre of Windsor and keeps up with her active family. Now she is preparing for her next challenge: participating in and completing the 1999 New York Marathon.

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