

The RFI and the Stubby Pencil

By Ron Winter

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Two Construction Delay Claim Specialists, a Scheduler, and a Paralegal sit in a high-rise office around a large conference table surrounded by piles of documents. They hunch over a ratty, dirty sheet of paper mumbling when the paralegal holds the sheet up to the light and declares, "No, it's a 'P' and that would make the word, 'parallel.'" Is this some scene from the 1950's? No, it's how we do claims analysis nowadays.

The microcomputer is over 30 years old and we are still mixing mud and pencil lead on paper to communicate the biggest source of delays and cost overruns in the construction industry. I'm talking about hand-written Request For Information (RFI) forms, the standard method in which the Contractor notes a design problem in the field and communicates the impasse to the Architect In Charge. This is not just a problem for Delay Analysts. I have worked for years 'out in the field' and have seen Architects, Project Managers, Engineers, even Secretaries brought to their knees trying to make sense of the contents of an RFI.

It's not as if you can afford to ignore an indecipherable portion of an RFI. This is the stuff that claims are made of. Mistake the meaning and the RFI is sent back to the Architect, along with a Notice of Potential Claim for delaying the project. Mistake the answer and the Contractor builds to an unsafe or more expensive method than envisioned (yes, Architects use pencils too!) The worse the situation, the more RFIs will be issued and argued over. This has got to stop.

Computers have been used extensively on all large construction projects in the United States for more than a decade now. Meeting notes and the logs for such things as RFIs and other documents have been transferred to the computer for its obvious advantages. No one draws anymore - all design work is done by computer using CAD software. Even the specifications are created with word-processing and reused over and over again. So why are we still using a pencil to fill in forms to ask questions in the field?

Long ago (when your father was 15 years younger) we didn't have cheap and ever-present fax machines. The Architect was required to be very much more participatory than they are now. On large projects, they would either spend the whole day at the jobsite or visit multiple times per day. When the Contractor had a question, the Architect would walk over and take a look at the problem and make a ruling, or research the problem and then tell the Contractor how to proceed. Time was a little less 'of the essence' then. Documentation of As-Built construction details was also a lot less professional.

Nowadays, CPM schedules track delays to the day (or less) and the ever-present pressure to reduce costs has pushed the Architect back into the office. When a Contractor comes across an unexpected condition (or if he can't make up his mind whether he should use 6 Penny nails or 8 Penny,) he grabs an RFI form, gets the next serial number from the log and grabs a stubby pencil. He or she writes their question to the Architect in the space on the form reserved for questions and then faxes it off.

The fax arrives instantly at the architect's office (if they didn't run out of paper) and sits in the bin for a couple of hours until the Secretary picks it up and puts it in the Architect's in basket. When the Architect gets out of one of their ever-present meetings, he or she will read the fax, roll their eyes and grab a mechanical pencil. Calling on their great storehouse of knowledge (especially concerning claims and design culpability) the Architect will write in the space provided for responses, "Do it according to specifications" and fax it back to the Contractor.

The Contractor, knowing a good thing when he sees it, decides to press further and takes the fax sent to him by the Architect and grabs a stubby pencil. He places a "R" after the RFI Number (for Revised) and crams more questions into the same question box used previously. He can't use the back of the form because fax machines don't read two-sided papers. He can and does add more sheets to the original, but all must refer to the first page, which is where the sign-off occurs.

The further behind, or more deeply in debt the Contractor becomes, the more RFIs of this type are sent. To be fair, the more complicated the project and the less time allotted for Architectural duties by the Owner, the more these are needed. The entire history of a construction project can sometimes be summarized in the RFIs. This is why the day of the stubby pencil and preprinted forms should come to an end.

The solution is to require that all RFIs be entered into a work processor and Emailed to the Architect directly or over the Internet. If the Contractor resists due to costs, buy him a cheap computer and install it in his office. A 386 computer with a DOS word-processor and modem software can be had for \$500 or less. More expensive Windows setups can be had used for \$800. Otherwise, just have the Construction Manager's Secretary keep a stack of disks and trade the Contractor a new disk for old and transfer the information yourself.

Some would say that this doesn't solve the problem of drawing sketches. Forgetting the fact that you can now draw sketches with most high-end work processors and that this feature will only be getting better, you don't need to draw sketches. It is my opinion that the sketches drawn are less useful (and understandable) to outside sources than a good textual description. The sketches drawn require familiarity with the actual configuration out in the field and lose most of their value in later reviews. If one of your intentions is to document actual construction practices, then sloppy, out of context sketches should be avoided.

Revised questions to responses should appear after the response, not crammed into the available space in the original question box. Responses to the revised questions should clearly indicate what questions are being answered. As this is a legal document whose fate might be to end up in a Court of Law, clarity and lack of ambiguity is essential from the start to the finish in such cases.

Besides, there are real advantages beyond just clarity to be gained by making RFI's 'electronic.' Instead of the Architect stating, 'build as per spec' why not have the original specification available electronically and simply cut and paste the pertinent section into the response. Responses will not have to be limited to the size of the response box. Think of the time it will save on both sides and perhaps the Contractor might begin to think of the Architect as a partner in this venture. Have a little pity on us Claim Analysts who are losing our eyesight playing the RFI Guessing Game.