

PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINTS – JULY 2008

Fence project failed to corral project stakeholders

By Kevin Archbold

In the USA, immigration has long been a hot button issue in political circles. Areas of discussion include how many immigrants to allow into the US each year, and how to best prevent illegal immigration. One of the more visible elements of current policy has been the ongoing construction of a fence along a long stretch of the US-Mexico border. Most of the fence, part of the Secure Border Initiative (SBI), will look pretty much like you would expect a fence to look like. But, south of Tucson, AZ there is an experimental prototype fence – a “virtual” fence, also known as Project 28, that is not a physical barrier, but a series of cameras, detectors, and sensors.

We recently learned that the US federal government will scrap the \$20 million prototype virtual fence because it has been deemed to be “insufficient”. The prime contractor will apparently replace the entire system with a new series of towers and communication equipment.

On the one hand, you could argue that prototypes are never intended to be kept. Their whole purpose is to be able to cost-effectively test systems and concepts, and then create new systems based on what you have learned.

On the other hand, even though I’m sure many technical lessons have been learned in the short time the fence has been operational, the three most basic and glaring lessons learned would seem to be points that could have been learned by the SBI program office in a Project Management 101 class, long before the project began.

Lesson number one - you must talk to all the project stakeholders about their requirements for the project – particularly the ones who are going to make most use the project. In the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) evaluation report released on February 27th, SBI program office and Border Patrol officials are quoted as saying that the requirements for how the Project 28 system was to operate were designed and developed with *minimal input* from the intended operators of the system, including Border Patrol agents. This is like building a custom home by guessing what the home-owner client will want in their house.

Lesson number two - do not agree to a project that is doomed to fail. In the same GAO report, SBI program officials state that there was not enough time built into the contract to obtain feedback from all of the intended users of the system during its design and development. In other words, the program office agreed to a contract that could not succeed because the schedule was unrealistic. To be fair, the contract was probably in place before the program office was created, but by not adequately addressing this unrealistic expectation amongst the stakeholders as soon as it became apparent, the program office became complicit in perpetuating the unrealistic goal.

Lesson number three – set, and manage, your stakeholder expectations. Put another way - corral your stakeholders, and keep them corralled. In an April 23rd Associated Press article, Greg Giddens, executive director of the SBI program office in Washington, said "Project 28 was not intended to be the final, state-of-the-art system for catching illegal immigrants. I think some people understood that and some didn't. We didn't communicate that well."

This last point is something I return to again and again in my most basic project management courses. Most projects fail not because the technical experts couldn't deliver, and not because the schedule couldn't be met. But because the project stakeholders were not on the same page *from the beginning*. While the project manager may believe he has delivered a wonderful project, if it's not what people are expecting, he has failed.

Hopefully, as the prime contractor prepares to replace Project 28, these lessons along with many others, have been learned, or more money will be wasted learning basic project management skills. And if you manage projects, which most of us do, remember to get those stakeholders corralled, and keep them there. Just don't use an electronic fence to do it.

About the Author:



Kevin Archbold

Author



Kevin Archbold, PMP has 20 years of project management experience with large and small organizations in a variety of industries, including automotive, nuclear, telecoms, trucking, IT, recruiting, HR, and government. Kevin has presented at both the local and national level within the Project Management Institute (PMI), and is currently VP of Programs for the Tucson chapter of PMI. He has been providing project management consulting and training services through Key Consulting (www.consulting.ky) since 1999, and has been residing in Tucson since last year. Kevin can be contacted at archboldk@consulting.ky.