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State takes baby steps toward BIM But small firms fear cost of design software

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Designers have no choice but to accept that building-information modeling software will soon become the primary medium for the industry, said Melissa Destree.

But that acceptance won't come without a price.

"We are feeling the pressure to make the jump since we work as a consultant to larger firms," said Destree, the president of Madison-based Destree Design Architects Inc. "We looked at the numbers, though, and it's \$5,600 to put the software on one work station, and then you have to figure the hours put into training.

"MasterGraphics Inc. in Waukesha offers a three-day training course for \$1,400, but the thought of losing someone here for three days ... I couldn't do it."

Those are some of the problems small design firms face in incorporating BIM, which is 3-D modeling that makes it easy to update any aspect of a given project. Kevin Connolly, the president and founder of Connolly Architects Inc., Milwaukee, said there are other problems, but he's still made BIM work for his company with a staff of five.

"I know there are firms out there that don't believe in it, or just think it's a (computer-aided design) upgrade," he said. "What would I say to convince them otherwise? I'd quote a wise shoe salesman who once said, 'Just do it.'"

One big project owner following that advice is the state of Wisconsin. The state Department of Administration's division of state facilities took part in a nationwide "BIM Storm" Thursday that saw design teams from across the country spend the day designing mock sites for areas around northern Los Angeles.

Teams worked interactively in real time designing specific sites, meaning a group of designers in Wisconsin could work with a group in Colorado on the same building.

"We heard about this and thought we might as well watch," said Bill Napier, who works for

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Kevin Connolly (left) and Brett Luecke of Connolly Architects Inc., Milwaukee, take part in a daylong national BIM workshop Thursday on behalf of the state of Wisconsin.

Daily Reporter Photo/Paul Snyder

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the state's Bureau of Architecture and Engineering. "Then we figured instead of watching, we might as well play along."

The Division of State Facilities requires BIM on some state projects, but Napier said the problem is there are no established guidelines.

"We use it on some larger projects and basically say, 'Use BIM to the best of your ability,'" he said. "Well, then you get companies going, 'What does that mean?' Some of them are very well-versed in it. Others aren't. We want to be able to learn more so we can set some standards."

Napier said DSF loosely targeted July 2009 as its deadline to put more defined BIM standards on most, if not all, of its projects.

That sounds good to Terry Bay, a project manager at Madison-based Mead & Hunt Inc., who said he'd like to see the state eventually require BIM from firms to qualify for projects. While Mead & Hunt works in BIM, the firm has yet to use it on a state project, and Bay said he understands why a transition can't be immediate.

"The state's going to have a lot to wrestle with, not only in terms of utilizing BIM, but also from a legal standpoint," he said. "State law requires the design, bid, build process now. If the switch is made to BIM, contractors are going to have to start getting involved earlier.

"(The state) is also conscientious about knocking firms out of the approach if a definitive switch is made."

And despite their size, firms like Destree Design recognize what's coming and are trying to brace for the switch. Although Destree said she can't make the \$40,000 investment to put software on every work station in the office, she did put it on one.

"We do work with (the Madison offices of) Bray Associates Architects and Mead & Hunt, and we didn't want them to be coming to us saying, 'You really need to learn this,'" she said. "We wanted to be somewhat familiar."

That's a big reason why Connolly said he hopes to see the state take BIM baby steps.

"If they said they wanted 100 percent BIM tomorrow, the state would fall apart," he said. "I think if you set minimum standards bit by bit, you give everyone sufficient time to adapt and take corrective action."

It might be hard at first, he said, but it can be done.

"We decided in 2000 we were going to do it, and by 2001 everything we did was 100 percent BIM," Connolly said. "We lost our butts on the first project we did at the time, but we never turned back."

Turning back may not be as big an issue as getting everyone there by the state's tentative 2009 deadline, Destree said.

"That," she said, "is going to mean a lot of training quickly."

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