

Becker & Frondorf will tell you what it costs



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From left: Charles Moleski, William P. Becker, John R. Frondorf and Matthew Salerno outside PAFA.

When John Frondorf was retained to estimate how much it would cost to renovate the interior of the Statue of Liberty, there were no comparisons to guide him on the price of certain items in the historic structure.

Buildings, Frondorf knows pretty well. The Statue of Liberty? That was entirely different.

How to figure out the cost of installing modern mechanical and electrical systems, stairs, elevators and other items in the 125-year-old statue? Then there was the matter of figuring in the expense of a daily boat trip that would carry workers and

Firm names two new principals for the first time

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materials. By most accounts, contractors would likely log eight-hour days but working just six hours to account for the daily two-hour round trip boat ride to the site. That would influence how long it would take to complete the renovation and how much labor would cost.

"I knew I could break it down into small pieces," Frondorf said.

Though he didn't know how much the statue's staircase cost to replace, he knew how much a foundation, rung of a step, and so forth would cost. He figured the job, including material, labor and every other little thing that will go into restoring and

upgrading the Statue of Liberty would run roughly \$29 million.

That's what it ended up coming to.

"That was more luck than anything," Frondorf said.

But not really.

For the last 13 years, Becker & Frondorf has cultivated a reputation for being exact, thorough, diligent and at times, tough. The Philadelphia business, formed by William P. Becker and John R. Frondorf, focuses on project management and cost estimating. Becker does the project management side of the business while Frondorf is the estimator. Both are architects by training.

One recent project Becker & Frondorf worked on was the installation in August of Paint Torch, a 53-foot Claes Oldenburg sculpture at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts' Lenfest Plaza. It was challenging and complex because, among other reasons, it involved several city agencies, closing North Broad Street and ensuring nothing under the city street was damaged when an extensive foundation was poured to support a heavy object jammed at an angle.

Becker & Frondorf has been involved in several buildings around Independence Mall including the Liberty Bell Pavilion, Independence Hall, the President's House, the National Constitution Center, National Museum of American Jewish History among others. It's currently working for the Franklin Institute, which is constructing a new 53,000-square-foot addition.

Its roster is nearly as deep in Washington, D.C., at Ivy League universities and state colleges. Its other line of work focuses on the hospitality industry. For example, it did project management work on the New York Marriott Financial Center in Manhattan and the Pentagon City Residence Inn in Washington.

"Every building project only happens with a team of firms," Becker said, rattling off some of the parties involved in a project such as an architect, engineer, landscape architect and owner. "Our role on all projects is to get a team assembled and organized and protect the client. There are finite budgets and aspirations that often exceed resources."

The National Museum of American Jewish History hired Becker & Frondorf to oversee the construction of its new building, which including an endowment, totaled \$150 million. The museum didn't have the

time or expertise in-house to monitor such a massive project including the exhibitions, said museum President and CEO Michael Rosenzweig. A building committee met every week to track progress while it was under construction.

"It was a very intensive process and challenging work to do," Rosenzweig said. "There are thousands of moving parts. We had so many contracts and so many different things to monitor and they held people feet to the fire with respect to the process, and did things that we definitely couldn't have done."

The museum opened on time and on budget.

Becker & Frondorf decided to join forces in August 1998. Becker had always wanted to venture on his own and Frondorf found a good business partner. Both are trained as architects.

"We felt we could serve clients on our own with each other," Frondorf said.

So far, it has worked.

One of the first projects the firm worked on was the conversion of the PSFS building at 1200 Market St. in Center City into the Loews Hotel. By the time Becker & Frondorf got involved with the \$70 million conversion, it was two-thirds designed and it had been discovered that portions of the structure were basically disintegrating. This was a hidden challenge only to be revealed when actual work began on the building, complicating matters.

"There was a lot of tension, but it never hurt the flow of the project," Becker said.

Through the Loews project, the firm was introduced to what was then Host Marriott Services Corp., and from that kernel, Becker & Frondorf expanded into hotel project management. That entails managing both hard — bricks and mortar — and soft — bedding, clock radios, lamps and carpeting — for a hotel.

It counts cultivating relationships as its prime source of business, and in what may seem ironic, relationships with clients are often even more solidified when something goes wrong.

"We don't avoid the phone call," Becker said about notifying a client when an issue crops up. "We've always tried hard to

satisfy a client. Without the client, there is no business."

Same goes when dealing with a team that has been assembled to work on a project. In spite of technology that allows for teleconferencing, Becker is adamant about having in-person meetings.

"I still believe the single most important management tool is face to face meetings of a project team," he said. "There just is no substitute."

While a flow of projects has been steady over the years, the recession, as it did the construction sector, affected Becker & Frondorf. At times, it's been "scary," Becker said, especially in 2008 and 2009 when construction work basically came to a standstill. To counter the ebb, Becker & Frondorf reduced their own compensation and made other adjustments, such as not bringing on additional staff until it landed a job.

Like in many partnerships or marriages, those involved figure out how things work best and there's typically no set blueprint to follow. For Becker & Frondorf, they manage their respective sides of the business autonomously. Each hires his own employees, who then report to whomever hired them. This works because each practice area requires different skills.

"We have a great relationship," Becker said. "It's like we have two different practices, but we're one team. It works."

On certain matters, the two make decisions together and over the summer decided, for the first time, to name two new principals in the firm, Charles Moleski and Matthew Salerno. Moleski focuses on institutional work and Salerno is involved with the firm's hospitality clients. Each has been with Becker and Frondorf for several years.

The time had come to bring principals into the fold. For one, Becker & Frondorf didn't want to lose two employees they deemed valuable and talented. Secondly, succession planning needed to be arranged. While Frondorf, 64, is less eager to slow down, Becker, 66, decided it was time to make some adjustments to his schedule though he's not retiring.

"It's a recognition of how it ends," he said. "We just don't know when."

'Without the client, there is no business.'

William P. Becker
Becker & Frondorf