

# Don't **DELAY** Questions on Campus **CONSTRUCTION**

*Boards can best protect the institution's interests during a project's early stages.*

**T**O EMBARK ON A MAJOR CONSTRUCTION PROJECT, various individuals from within and outside a college or university must work together and remain united for the duration of the effort. This project team will be responsible for shepherding the project through planning, design, construction, and ultimately, occupancy. The internal team consists of those who will assume leadership responsibilities, eventual users who will have input into the project, and staff who will provide support and manage the external contractors and consultants.

The key to managing complexity, reducing risk, and saving time and money lies in one important step board members can take: asking powerful questions at the start of a building project. Trustees are ideally positioned to ask such questions because they possess a deep understanding of where the institution is headed and enough distance from day-to-day operational demands that can foreclose creative problem-solving and hard questioning. Trustees also bring the continuity of thought and institutional memory that can help campus facilities

staff reconcile competing needs. (Example: We ran the access road there because it provided the best view to the academic quad and avoided the underground steam tunnel.)

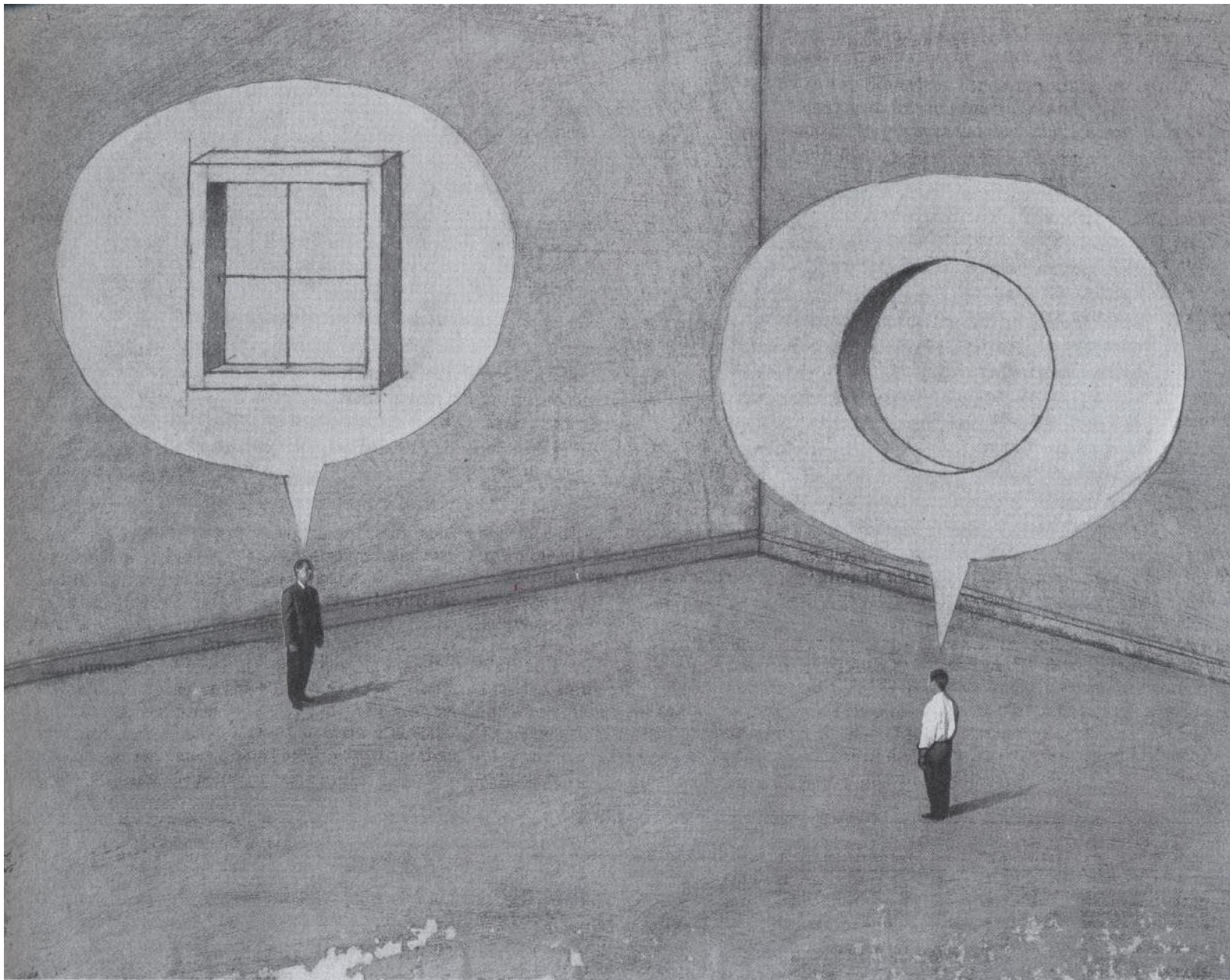
What's more, trustees have the best vantage point for unearthing any underlying assumptions that can prevent progress or limit creative problem solving.

**Why Ask?** Asking powerful questions is essential for three reasons. First, campus building projects are complicated, involve many risks, and require substantial investments of time and money. Second, the institution's ability to influence the outcome of a project is greatest at the outset. Third, the beginning of a project is a tumultuous time, filled with uncertainties and anticipation and a shared eagerness to make progress quickly.

By asking certain key questions at this early stage, trustees can help ensure the institution will avoid painful reengineering, redesign, and late-stage reductions in scope, when the institution's purchasing power and leverage are sub-

• BY DAN GAINSBORO •





stantially reduced. Furthermore, failure to ask essential questions at the outset can result in avoidable change orders that can increase project costs as much as 20 percent.

In most cases, the project team's members are anxious about their ability to deliver the goods and uncertain about what obstacles lie ahead. They may be eager to get through the awkward and unsettling planning phase and move on to the more predictable design and construction phase where progress is more apparent. Adding to their uneasiness, most projects require them to answer questions and make decisions that are not central to the institution's mission and may have significant long-term effects.

For example, deciding to install air conditioning and fixed windows in a new building commits the institution both to the initial cost

of the system and to ongoing energy costs for every year the building is in operation. What if the project team or trustees raised the powerful question about how a natural ventilating solution that consumes less energy would affect the building's lifetime operating cost?

It is important that such powerful questions are asked *before* user groups and others are seduced by the pretty picture an architect created before scope, budget, and schedule issues are resolved. The challenge during the start-up phase is that there is often too little information available to make a good decision. In response, most institutions assume the answer is to hire the architect and engineers so that more information can be developed.

More often than not, however, adding the architect (and in some cases, a builder) at this point tends to cause the process to focus on



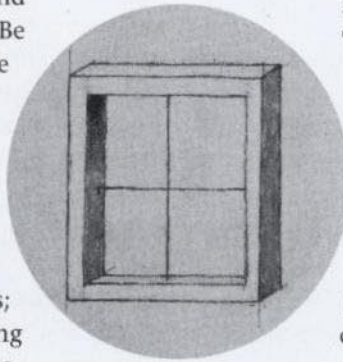
problem-solving before the institution has had sufficient time to define the problem. While an architectural plan can help an institution visualize a building program, there is a high risk that this preliminary image may be adopted as the final design before institutional objectives have been fully explored.

**A Tale of Two Projects.** In my experience, institutions vary in their definition of project conception. For some it is the moment a dean or development officer identifies a “must do” program to respond to a market demand or donor gift. For others, it is only after the necessary finances have been secured and all internal and regulatory approvals have been obtained. Be clear about the starting point, because the return on asking powerful questions is directly proportional to the stage at which the questions are addressed.

Boards generally take up building issues as part of creating the annual major maintenance, asset preservation, and capital improvement or modernization programs; while determining the scope of a fund-raising campaign; in response to a specific gift or donation; or as part of a comprehensive master-planning process. The committees involved in these processes include buildings and grounds, budget and finance, strategic planning, as well as design review boards.

Let’s explore two examples that illustrate the importance of asking powerful questions. One project involved the development of a state-of-the-art, 40,000-square-foot science and technology facility for a 3,500-student university located on the suburban edge of a fairly dense urban area. The need for a new center had been identified in the university’s strategic plan as the most important priority for maintaining its competitive advantage.

The initial thought was to locate the new facility in the heart of the academic quad. Recognizing the size of the financial commitment—\$20 million—the university’s administration decided it would be prudent to commit



to a comprehensive planning effort.

The goal of the planning effort was to determine whether locating the new facility in the quad would meet the project’s defined goals. The powerful questions board members asked included the following: Can we accomplish our goals within our budget? What constraints are we likely to encounter as a result of this location? Can our existing facility staff manage this project? What critical adjacent facilities will be taxed as a result of this location? What future planning opportunities would be created or eliminated by pursuing this option? How will students respond to this new location? Will the project as envisioned support our fund-raising efforts and reinforce the character of the existing campus? Would an alternative location strengthen the way the university is viewed in the community?

The planning phase identified several obstacles to the proposed location that would cause the project to exceed the budget by 20 percent. Equally important, this proposed location would shift the character of the campus away from a suburban university environment to a more urban one. At the same time, the board’s questioning led to the development of an alternative location that could be accomplished within budget and with a minimum of operational disruption.

Now let’s look at a second example. This institution skipped over the powerful questioning phase and experienced a much less favorable outcome. The project involved a thriving urban university eager to expand its market share, meet the needs of its student body, and remain competitive. At the same time, the school’s administration needed to deliver on a long-delayed promise to build a state-of-the-art student center. The existing site was limited by both physical and regulatory constraints. Like several other buildings on campus, the existing student union suffered from a long list of deferred maintenance needs, inefficient adjacent facilities, and poor vehicular access.

In this case, the failure to ask powerful ques-



tions resulted in the cost of the program escalating 20 percent beyond the \$25 million in available funds. When queried about why the board was not engaged in the process of asking questions, the project leader explained that he felt it was too late to question the underlying assumptions that led to the current design. The absence of such questioning led the project team to struggle to meet budget constraints and to encounter several major problems late in the process—interference with underground utilities tunnels, inflexible academic program and event calendars, and severe construction mitigation challenges.

As a result, the institution faced significant additional expenses and protracted internal negotiations in its attempts to resolve program conflicts. There was little time or opportunity to consider options, the long-term consequences of initial decisions, or to reach out to campus constituents to secure support. In the end, virtually all the university's future expansion planning options were eliminated.

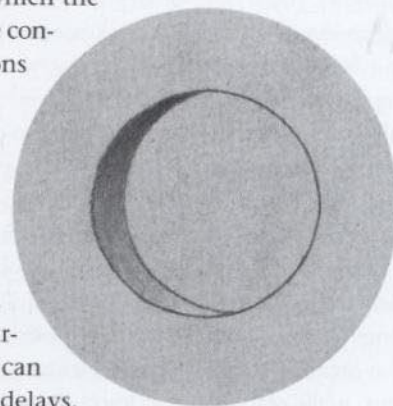
**The Costs of Silence.** It is remarkable how some institutions attempt to solve a problem even before it has been sufficiently defined, only to

discover the wrong aspect of the problem has been solved. The best way to avoid this temptation is for the board to commit itself to a rigorous goal-setting exercise and then asking and answering the powerful questions. Once defined, a project's goals become the ground rules for the project team, the criteria against which the board can measure progress, and the context in which all important decisions are made.

Unfortunately, not all projects undergo this essential first step, and powerful questions often do not get asked.

Because most campus building projects are high-stakes ventures, failure to ask powerful questions during the predesign planning phase can lead to cost overruns, schedule delays, unhappy stakeholders, diminished political goodwill, delays in new programs, or even the forfeiture of a donor gift. ♦

*Dan Gainsboro (dgainsboro@genesisplanners.com) is president and chief executive officer of Genesis Planners, Inc., a project planning and management firm in Waltham, Mass.*



## STRATEGIC QUESTIONS FOR BOARDS TO CONSIDER ABOUT NEW CONSTRUCTION

**A** powerful question from a board member generates curiosity and invites creativity. It can focus inquiry and stimulate reflective conversation. And it can provoke thought and expose underlying assumptions.

Trustees can ask two types of questions at the outset of a project—general, mostly tactical questions that apply to virtually every project (What can we afford to spend? When does

the project need to be completed?) and strategic questions that stem from the unique attributes of the project and the institution's culture. Examples of strategic questions about building projects include the following:

- Is this project the most important priority for the institution to pursue right now?
- Is the project consistent with the institution's strategic plan and mission?

- Is the organization's physical plant staff the best group to manage this project?
- What is the project leadership's collective definition of project success?
- What is at stake if the project succeeds or fails?
- What opportunities for change might the project bring to the campus? —D.G.