

Contracting Out Is In

Railroads continue to tap outside help for infrastructure development and maintenance, as the recent work of five contractors illustrates

BY JON OLSON

Editor's note: Passenger and freight railroads continue to contract out for a range of infrastructure needs — from system extensions to project oversight to emergency repair work to general upkeep.

This month, Progressive Railroading focuses on work recently completed by five contractors, here is one case: PNR RailWorks Inc. All five reflect the vitality that's evident in today's railroad construction and maintenance segment, whatever the economic weather.

PNR RAILWORKS: *Icing on Edmonton's Rail-Extension Cake*

As winter descends, residents from the south side of Edmonton, Alberta, now have a more efficient commute. Another 1.5-mile extension to the city's light-rail transit (LRT) line was recently completed. By April 2010, the full 4.9-mile expansion effort will be complete, enabling the transit system to double weekday ridership to 100,000, the city estimates.

Edmonton's LRT service has been a work in progress for three decades. Begun in 1978 for the Commonwealth Games, the system soon will extend 12.4 miles from south to northwest, with planned additions in several directions.

PNR RailWorks Inc. (PNR) is working with Edmonton on an LRT extension for the third time, says Vice President Peter Pearce. For the most recent project, the contractor employed a seasonal workforce that peaked at nearly 100. The job? To lay track and install signals.

"The track is finished all the way to the south end," Pearce said in early November. "On the signal side, all of the equipment will be installed in the field at the end of November — gates and

whistles and bells, all that stuff will be installed."

PNR's trackwork contract is worth about \$16.2 million, says city project engineer Shawn Ellsworth. PNR's share of the signal work — in a subcontract with GE Transportation — brings the total PNR bill to \$25 million.

ON SCHEDULE AND WITHIN BUDGET

PNR's work is the icing on the cake. The complexity of laying new track in a metropolitan area of roughly 1 million pushed the total project cost to \$641.7 million. The city purchased homes and other property, built two underpasses and erected a bridge. Track bed preparation, a pedestrian bridge and a multi-use trail were among the factors that drove the cost up. About 50 contractors were involved, Ellsworth says.

The project was on schedule and within budget as of early November, Ellsworth says. And the complicated logistics of the project gave PNR a chance to distinguish itself.

As contractors fell behind, a domino effect of delays came into play. "PNR actually did well during the summer to get our overall project back on schedule, because we were starting to fall behind a little bit, and they put some good effort into it," Ellsworth says.

Like every project, the Edmonton effort — among PNR's largest, Pearce says

— had its own wrinkles.

"One of the challenges in this one [was] the restricted work area — it was a very narrow corridor for us to work in," he says.

Some of the track was installed in the middle of a divided roadway; other stretches were built along busy roads, backed up against private property. Bringing in cranes and other equipment meant "we probably had lane closures every day," Pearce says. Cross streets presented their own challenges.

"In the majority of cases, the intersection would have been closed for a period of seven days, so the city would set up detours," Pearce says.

By this coming April, when the extension is complete, passengers will be able to ride through 15 stations, covering more than 12 miles, in 34 minutes, without the bother of switching from bus to train, the city of Edmonton's Web site proclaims.

Meanwhile, the city is pursuing other extensions as part of its rail network master plan, which stresses the use of rail to promote revitalization, and community and business density, according to a city LRT Public Involvement Report. Construction will begin next year on a line that runs northwest from the city center, with lines to the east, west and southwest on the drawing board, Ellsworth says. ■