

Small Projects, Big Successes: Managing Smaller-Scale Projects in New England

Written by: Peter Martini, First Vice President, New England Operations, Hill International, Inc. and Paul G. Kalous, Program Director, Hill International, Inc.

Owners sometimes assume a small project will only face small challenges. In fact, projects with a smaller scope and size can result in sizable issues, as planning and preparation are often compressed and headaches that might have been addressed with little cost and schedule impact early in the process rise up with a vengeance during construction.

Project and construction management firm Hill International, Inc. is known for delivering large, complex, and challenging mega-projects. However, Hill also manages many smaller projects and knows the risks and opportunities associated with delivering fast-track, relatively modest projects.

Hill's ability to manage smaller projects is exemplified by the firm's Massachusetts team. Vice President Peter Martini explains, "Our roots in New England are in managing projects for our local clients—the places where we live ourselves, for municipalities and public agencies, mostly. Certainly, we have and can manage large infrastructure and building projects in the region, but we're especially proud of the work we do on the renovations, upgrades, and modernizations for our local clients."

Martini says in his experience there are four major challenges in managing small projects:

1. Defining the project. Owners might not consider a modernization or upgrade a full project and try to execute the work as a repair or quick enhancement, only to discover that work in fact requires more planning and careful execution.
2. Putting in the right amount of planning. This applies both to undertaking too much planning as well as too little. Part of the key to small project success is finding the right balance.
3. Getting buy-in from all project parties. Creating the right-sized plan for a project won't help clients achieve their goals if the designer, contractor, or any stakeholder treats the project as an afterthought.
4. Controlling and tracking the project through to completion. Just like large projects, cost and schedule monitoring allows owners to make informed decisions as work proceeds.

Martini cites three projects as embodying the Hill team's approach to managing smaller projects successfully: the Nauset Light Beach Bath House, the Boott Cotton Mills Museum, and the Boxford Town Hall and Library, all in Massachusetts. "Although different in terms of scope and program, these projects show how a comprehensive, holistic management approach can be a major benefit."

Nauset Light Beach Bathhouse

Through a task order contract with the National Park Service (NPS), Hill is serving as construction management representative (CMR) for the Rebuilding of the Nauset Light Beach Bathhouse, Parking Lot, and Site Improvements project. Located in Eastham, Massachusetts, specifics of the project include public restroom upgrades, lifeguard headquarters, septic system replacement, and a new footpath at the Province Lands Visitor Center.

Hill Program Director Paul G. Kalous, AIA, MCPPO, explains,

“The Nauset Light project has a lot of the characteristics we see on smaller projects. It needs to be completed relatively quickly, in this case in time to take advantage of the summer 2021 tourist season. As we kicked off in November 2020, meeting the planned spring opening means getting the job up and running quickly, but also doing it right.”

Kalous adds, “NPS is a sophisticated client and knows how to execute a project of any size. But less prepared owners are sometimes tempted to think that, because it’s a smaller job, they can compress or even skip the planning process. We’ve come in on jobs where work began without much more than a nod to planning. What we found on those jobs was that essential steps, like defining stakeholder expectations and developing a master schedule, were skipped entirely, or started late. Then the project has to catch up, adding cost and schedule.”

Kalous explains this is not the case at Nauset. “After the existing bathhouse buildings were picked up and relocated to shuttle bus lots, the larger and more modern facility is now under construction. Conditions were well documented, and as CMR we verified NPS had the right process in place, from procurement to close-out.”

Conversely, sometimes management teams apply methodologies and frameworks meant for larger projects to smaller assignments. This can result in overkill and slow the project through unnecessary meetings and processes more applicable to projects with a wider footprint or more complex systems. “We focus on the specific needs of the project,” says Kalous. “And then apply the tools and techniques to manage this particular piece of work. It’s not a one-size-fits all approach by any means.”

Currently, Nauset Light is on-track to meet its opening date and is proceeding within budget.



Boxford Town Hall and Library

In Boxford, Massachusetts, Hill is providing owner's representative services to the Town for renovations to the Town's 15,000-square-foot Town Hall. Work includes exterior envelope repairs, interior renovations to improve space efficiency, and the installation of an upgraded HVAC system. As owner's representative, Hill is providing project management, cost management, schedule management, and quality and safety management services through daily inspections of the site. Hill is also supporting the project with administrative services and as an HVAC consultant.



The Library modernizations include a new adult services space, an extended young adult space, and a central circulation service desk area. The design for the interior renovations is characterized by the removal of walls for more open space and opportunities for natural light. External renovations will repair windows with persistent water leaks.

Kalous says the project seems straightforward enough, but adds that with a five-month schedule, the renovations require a quick-turnaround approach that maximizes available funds without compromising the goals of the project. "We developed a project charter for the entire team for Boxford," says Kalous. "This document guides everything we do, not just from a management perspective but from the client's expectations to the designer and the GC. Some might consider a charter unnecessary on a project of this size, but in fact it's what drives us all to realize the project as planned."

Boott Cotton Mills Museum

Hill provided project and construction management services to the NPS for a replacement project at the Boott Cotton Mills Museum in Lowell, Massachusetts. The project replaced 333 deteriorated wood windows with new custom aluminum windows and repaired 27 existing wood windows that were installed in 1980.

A landmark attraction in Lowell National Historic Park, the museum was originally a cotton mill and features a recreated weaving room with operating power looms, the Boott Gallery, a Special Events Center, the Tsongas Industrial History Center, and the Boott Museum Store. In addition, the museum's gallery includes temporary exhibits detailing America's industrialization, the growth and decline of Lowell's mills, and the textile production process.

The Hill team was responsible for maintaining clear communication between all parties, facilitating progress meetings, conducting submittal reviews, drafting scoping documents for possible construction contract modifications, and performing inspections, among other support services.

"Although relatively modest in terms of cost and scope, the project presented a compressed schedule of only six months, and during the fall and winter," says Kalous. "That's not uncommon for smaller projects, especially in the New England region where so many public projects also involve attractions and landmarks, but it meant we needed to get our team on the same page and get to work."

"Our team focused on communications. We facilitated progress meetings, led submittal reviews, and drafted modifications for possible contract changes, all in addition to our inspection responsibilities. Thanks to our emphasis on keeping everyone informed, the project finished on time in the early spring."

Leadership and Ownership

Martini explains Hill developed its approach to small projects in New England through decades of experience. "We've managed school renovations, public safety facilities, and town hall additions and upgrades for decades," he says. "Every project is unique, regardless of size and scope, but we also know that smaller projects have their own set of opportunities and constraints. Hill's approach to these projects consistently delivers on-time, within budget results for our clients. That's always our goal, whether it's for a multi-school construction program or for a new restroom at a state park."

Martini adds that these types of projects also benefit Hill. "For our New England team, our smaller projects give our project managers the chance to truly own a job where they live and work," he says. "Almost everyone on our staff has a background on large, multi-year projects. These smaller projects give them a chance to lead a project from inception to close-out, usually within a 12-month period or less. They provide an opportunity for leadership and decision making, which creates energy and caring among the entire team."

"At the conclusion of these projects, our PMs can truly say, 'I did that!'"



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About the Authors:

Peter Martini is First Vice President, New England Operations, for [Hill International, Inc.](#) He has more than 40 years of construction industry experience, including work as a laborer, surveyor, estimator, project manager, and field supervisor. Peter has served on the front end of strategic planning and internal management development of systems and procedures and led the first designation of ISO 9000 for a Massachusetts construction firm and Commonwealth of Massachusetts Chapter 149 and 149a projects. He is responsible for all of Hill's New England operations.



[Hill International Inc.](#) Program Director **Paul G. Kalous** has more than 26 years of experience in the A/E/C industry. Paul's areas of expertise include project and construction management, procurement, architecture, and cost estimating. Paul provides project direction and client and project management services for renovation, expansion, and construction projects. He is also responsible for delivering projects on schedule and within budget, as well as overseeing and coordinating with project teams to establish goals and standards for project quality.

