

Dorothy Robyn

Commissioner, Public Buildings Service
U.S. General Services Administration

By Michael J. Keegan

Leading GSA's Public Buildings Service



The Obama administration's recently proposed budget calls for more investment in the nation's public buildings. These investments, according to the administration, will enable GSA's Public Buildings Service (PBS) to properly maintain and improve the real estate assets owned and paid for by the American people.

"We are the real estate arm of the federal government," explains

Dorothy Robyn, commissioner of PBS. Often referred to as the landlord to the civilian agencies, PBS acquires space on behalf of the federal government through new construction and leasing, and acts as a caretaker for federal properties across the country. "We have a total of 375 million square feet of space," Robyn continues. "Our portfolio has slightly more federally leased than owned space, totaling about 9,200 buildings throughout the U.S. and its territories."

Managing such an expansive portfolio involves close to 7,000 staff and a region-based organizational footprint that encompasses 11 regions. "I have four major offices," outlines Robyn. "There is the portfolio management office that does all assets planning, which includes managing client relationships with our federal agency customers. We have a design and construction office. The third major office handles leasing, and finally, we have a building operation and maintenance office." As PBS commissioner, Robyn oversees the work performed by these offices, as well as directs resources, manages stakeholder expectations, and sets strategic direction of PBS. Though the job is challenging under normal circumstances, Robyn took the helm in the aftermath of congressional investigations about mismanagement, and

has worked with acting GSA Administrator Dan Tangherlini to address many of the issues facing PBS. In tackling these pressing issues, challenges remain.

Robyn recognizes as significant challenges the need to solidify PBS's budget and strengthen its organizational structure. Since the 1970s, PBS has been funded through a quasi-revolving loan fund called the Federal Building Fund. Federal agencies pay PBS rent, whether for leased or federally owned space. PBS uses these funds to operate, maintain real estate, and pay commercial lessors. "The reason it's a quasi-revolving fund, as opposed to a revolving fund," Robyn explains, "is that Congress must appropriate the money that we use." Congress has appropriated more than what goes into the fund, but not lately. "Over the last three years, we have not received access to all the money coming into the Federal Building Fund," declares Robyn. She notes that over the last couple of years about a billion to a billion-and-a-half dollars from the fund have been diverted into other activities. "We have a huge backlog of unmet repair and maintenance needs," Robyn admits. "The money going into the Federal Building Fund is money that should be reinvested in these buildings. It is absolutely critical to the future of PBS to have full access."

The second overarching challenge involves the organizational structure of PBS. Robyn points out that Administrator Tangherlini has reorganized GSA in some key ways. He has centralized financial, data, and personnel functions. For her, it's all about establishing the best structure for PBS to be successful. "What PBS does is inherently local in nature. We build, maintain, and operate buildings," Robyn acknowledges, "but not everything needs to be done in 11 places, and that is the way PBS is currently organized. We're dealing with perhaps an excess of regional autonomy that may have contributed to the problems of a year ago." This excessive



“Rightsizing our portfolio involves getting federal agencies to reduce their space requirements while also increasing their utilization. Technology and changing work habits have made it possible for agencies to carry out their mission with less and less space.”



“I think GSA and PBS, in particular, have an important role to play in the coming years as agencies are looking at reduced budgets and the need to do more with less. Real estate is an area where they can do that and we at PBS can help.”

regional autonomy also comes with a cost. PBS deals with very high overhead in part because of this regional structure. “We are trying to identify activities to be consolidated and done on a zonal basis.”

Along with tackling budget and organizational challenges, Robyn has also outlined several key priorities that frame her office’s strategic direction. These priorities include right-sizing PBS’s portfolio to find new ways of doing business. “This involves getting federal agencies to reduce their space requirements while also increasing their utilization. Technology and changing work habits have made it possible for agencies to carry out their mission with less and less space.” Whether it’s increasing telework or promoting collaborative workspaces, federal agencies seem to be reducing their space requirements while also changing the physical footprint of the space they use. “I am a proselytizer for this new approach to work space arrangements; it creates opportunities to dispose of property, thus permitting us to further right-size our portfolio.”

Robyn admits that there is a strong culture in GSA for promoting property disposal. “We take disposal very seriously,” she exclaims. “It’s a good business practice, but it’s not an easy thing to do. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has issued good reports on the impediments to disposal.” The biggest impediments, Robyn points out, are the upfront cost of getting rid of property, various legal requirements, and stakeholder interests. “It takes upfront expenditure in order to reduce the federal footprint. Agencies don’t have money.” To remedy this situation and ameliorate many of the impediments to property disposal, the administration has proposed the creation of a civilian-equivalent Defense Base Closure and Realignment, or BRAC, process. “The beauty of the BRAC process,” describes Robyn, “is that there is an independent commission that looks at a variety of alternatives and identifies the best options. Congress then has to vote up or down on the options; they cannot cherry-pick; it’s all or nothing. We just need authorization from Congress, which is why the administration has proposed legislation.”

It has also become critically important to reduce the costs of operating PBS buildings. Pursuing a “smart” buildings approach is a second priority for Robyn. “It’s about making our buildings more intelligent,” says Robyn. “With technologically

smart, sustainably designed spaces we’re able to save energy, reduce the cost to operate, have smaller carbon footprints, and more satisfied occupants; in fact, we think we can reduce our costs of energy and operation by as much as \$0.50 a square foot. GSA has a wonderful test bed program called the Green Proving Ground, using our buildings as beta sites for testing new technology.”

The third strategic priority is leveraging private capital or alternative ways of doing business. “There are a number of creative authorities that we are exploring. We’re looking closely at using our Exchange Authority. This authority permits us to exchange property that could be better used by another [group] for construction services, a building, or another piece of property.” The FBI’s J. Edgar Hoover building is a great candidate for using the exchange authority. This building occupies two city blocks of valuable real estate. It was built in 1974. It is an aging building that, according to Robyn, has become functionally obsolete. “It doesn’t meet the FBI’s security needs. It houses only about half of the FBI headquarters staff and no longer meets the FBI’s needs for collaborative workspace.” PBS is pursuing the idea of exchanging J. Edgar Hoover for a newly constructed or existing building in the National Capital Region that can house roughly 11,000 people in up to two million square feet of space.

Moving PBS forward is Robyn’s ultimate mission. “I think GSA and PBS, in particular, have an important role to play in the coming years as agencies are looking at reduced budgets and the need to do more with less. Real estate is an area where they can do that and we at PBS can help,” declares Robyn. ■

To learn more about GSA’s Public Buildings Service, go to www.gsa.gov/portal/category/21391.



To hear *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Dorothy Robyn, go to the Center’s website at www.businessofgovernment.org.



To download the show as a podcast on your computer or MP3 player, from the Center’s website at www.businessofgovernment.org, right click on an audio segment, select Save Target As, and save the file.



To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Dorothy Robyn, visit the Center’s website at www.businessofgovernment.org.