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Project Delivery Matchmaking: Choosing the Delivery Method That Fits Your Project

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OVERVIEW

Selecting a project delivery method is one of the most important decisions a government can make when planning capital projects. The choice affects not only cost and schedule but also the role of the owner, opportunities for local vendor participation, and risk allocation. When selecting a project delivery approach, key decision factors may include your local procurement law or policies, your government's desired level of control, tolerance for cost and schedule risk, administrative capacity, and need for design flexibility. A successful project will depend on having a clearly established process for selecting the delivery method that best accomplishes your goals related to speed, inclusion of local or specialized firms, collaborative design, or risk management.

Most governments will need to procure architectural and engineering (A&E) services, which are typically governed by qualifications-based selection rules rather than lowest-cost bids. The structure of the A&E contract, such as whether the designer is retained independently by the project owner or as part of an integrated team, can significantly shape which project delivery methods are feasible and how much control and flexibility the government will retain over scope, risk allocation, and collaboration later in the project.

We regularly hear from senior leaders and procurement officials who hold important decision-making roles yet lack project delivery expertise and need guidance on how to make this important choice. If you play a part in designing or procuring a public infrastructure project, you can and should have a point of view on which project delivery method to use, and this quick read will help you get there: it introduces the most common delivery methods used by local governments to deliver projects and offers guiding questions to help project leaders choose the right approach for their next project. Of course, any guidance in this document is subject to your government's statutes and procurement rules, so be sure to check with your legal team and research any limitations around project delivery methods before selecting your project's delivery method.

Why does the delivery method matter so much?

Project delivery methods define how design, construction, and risk are allocated between an owner (i.e., the government) and the vendors performing the work. The choice of delivery method influences the procurement strategy, the pool of vendors who can bid on your project, and the types of risk you and your vendor will need to manage. In traditional approaches such as Design-Bid-Build (DBB), cities separate the design and construction phases and award construction based solely on the lowest cost. This method is familiar, transparent, and widely used, but it can increase the risk of delays and change orders as unforeseen conditions or planning issues crop up once construction is underway.

In the initial stage of project development, most governments will need to procure architectural and engineering (A&E) services, which are typically governed by qualifications-based selection rules rather than lowest-cost bids. The structure of the A&E contract, such as whether the designer is retained independently by the project owner or as part of an integrated team, can significantly shape which project delivery methods are feasible and how much control and flexibility the government will retain over scope, risk allocation, and collaboration later in the project.

While DBB remains the most common method used across the country, more integrated approaches such as Design-Build (DB) and Construction Manager at Risk (CMAR) are becoming increasingly common choices for local governments. They offer faster mobilization and early cost certainty, and can help cities achieve strategic or context-specific goals related to equity, sustainability, or stakeholder engagement. Beyond this, there are many other variations in these project delivery methods, including Construction Manager Multi-Prime (CMMP), Progressive Design-Build (PDB), Job Order Contracting (JOC), and Public-Private Partnerships (P3s). These are not the primary focus of this document and are further described in the appendix. Choosing the delivery method is one of the most important decisions that will be made in a project, and it is equally one of the earliest moments to influence the outcome.

Overview of Delivery Methods

Design-Bid-Build (DBB)

Design-Bid-Build is a traditional project delivery method where a city contracts separately for design and construction. The design team, whether working directly in government or through an A&E services contract, prepares complete documents such as site plans, drawings, and technical specifications. The construction contract is then awarded through a separate procurement, usually to the lowest responsible bidder. This approach provides transparency and competitiveness but can create longer timelines and higher risk of change orders if project needs evolve. Overall, the DBB process focuses on expressly prescribed design criteria that the construction team is required to price and then deliver.

Design-Build (DB)

Design-Build combines design and construction services into a single contract with one entity, the design-builder. This method can accelerate project delivery, establish early cost certainty, and streamline accountability. However, DB may reduce the owner's traditional role in reviewing and approving detailed design decisions once the contract is awarded and can transfer more responsibility for design coordination, cost management, and schedule performance to the design-builder. In practice, this means the design-builder assumes more of the risk if the design does not meet performance goals or if construction costs exceed expectations. Because firms are taking on greater risk, they may price that risk into their proposals, and in some cases fewer firms may be willing or able to compete for the work. In return for this greater risk and flexibility, the DB team typically has enhanced contract incentives for meeting deadlines and key project goals (or penalties for failing to meet them). For example, contracts may include financial bonuses for completing construction ahead of schedule, meeting sustainability or performance targets, minimizing disruptions to traffic or community activities, or achieving cost savings through innovative design solutions. Conversely, contracts may impose financial penalties if milestones are missed or required performance standards are not met.

Construction Manager at Risk (CMAR)

Under Construction Manager at Risk, the city separately procures a design firm and hires a Construction Manager (CM) during early design to provide preconstruction services such as reviewing design plans for constructability, preparing cost estimates and scheduling scenarios, identifying potential risks or permitting challenges, and advising on construction phasing and procurement strategies. This early input helps the project team refine the design before construction begins and can reduce costly redesign or change orders later. During construction, the CM holds the construction contracts with subcontractors under a guaranteed maximum price (GMP). Once the GMP is established, the CM assumes cost and performance risk, offering the government greater cost certainty and a single point of accountability for the project.

Comparison

Project Delivery Method	Structure	Best For (Pros)	Challenges (Cons)	Vendor Considerations
Design-Bid-Build	Government contracts separately for design and construction; award usually goes to lowest responsible bidder.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Projects with well-defined scopes that don't require further input • Familiar, transparent, and competitive • Agency/Owner staff maintains high degree of approval and oversight over specifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer timeline due to sequential phases • Higher risk of change orders if scope evolves • Limited contractor input during design • Limited incentives for designer or contractor to innovate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible to a wide range of firms • Attractive to smaller firms who may not have the scale to compete for DB or CMAR projects
Design-Build	Single contract with a design-builder responsible for both design and construction; price and scope established early.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Projects with well-defined scopes and minimal anticipated changes • Faster procurement and mobilization • Early cost certainty • Single point of responsibility for design and construction • Shift to more performance and outcomes can incentivize DB teams to innovate or develop solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less owner control over certain design decisions (performance goals vs prescriptive goals) after contract award • Limited flexibility for scope changes, which can be costly • Potential misalignment with owner priorities if design is rushed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favors integrated teams with strong design and construction capabilities • Smaller firms typically participate as subcontractors • Needs advance planning and decision-making to contract at proper development stage • Strong contract terms are vital for optimal DB outcomes
Construction Manager at Risk (CMAR)	CM is selected early for preconstruction and later holds construction contracts; assumes cost and performance risk through a guaranteed maximum price (GMP).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Projects needing cost certainty before construction begins • Owners who want to shift construction risk to a single point of accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less direct owner control over subcontractor selection • CM may self-perform work, may require additional safeguards to address competition and conflict-of-interest risks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attractive to larger, integrated contractors who can manage subs • Smaller firms may only participate as subs, limiting direct contracts

How do I decide which project delivery method to use?

Choosing your preferred delivery method depends on balancing your city’s priorities: how quickly the project must get done, how flexible your budget is, trade-offs between risk and price, and how many vendors you’d like to include. Note that using a best-value (i.e., not just lowest cost) procurement lens does not require a government to use Design-Build: even under Design-Bid-Build, governments can consider non-cost factors such as qualifications, past performance, technical approach, schedule reliability, and lifecycle costs when selecting designers (except where prohibited by law). The key distinction is not the delivery method itself, but rather how the procurement is structured and which evaluation criteria are explicitly allowed under your jurisdiction’s laws.

Selecting the best method for a specific project requires an efficient, results-driven project planning process. Meeting internally with your project team early in the development phase, before A&E firms are selected or any official project planning has advanced, increases the likelihood of identifying good candidates for DB or CMAR. If you wait too late, you’re less likely to get good results with these delivery methods, which work best when selected early enough for contractors to contribute to design decisions, cost estimating, and construction planning. If the design is already largely complete or key project decisions have already been made, many of the advantages of these methods—such as collaboration, phased construction, and early procurement of materials—may be lost.

In addition to accelerating schedules, DB and CMAR can be particularly effective when a project can be divided into multiple work packages or early action phases. Under these approaches, certain elements (such as site preparation, utility relocation, procurement of long-lead materials, or foundational work) can begin while other components are still being designed. This phased or “parceled” approach allows governments to mobilize construction sooner, lock in pricing in inflationary environments, and address supply chain risks by procuring critical materials early. By advancing discrete portions of work while maintaining overall coordination, DB and CMAR can improve cost predictability and schedule performance without requiring full design completion at the outset.

Each method offers tradeoffs; some give you more control but require greater administrative capacity, while others transfer risk to vendors but can raise the cost if permitting issues or other delays arise. By assessing your project scope, internal resources, funding constraints, and strategic goals, you can make an informed decision about which approach best aligns with your needs. This kind of analysis may require conducting market research to refine your scope and survey the vendor landscape; for more information on market research, check out our quick read [Market Research: the Key to Your Next RFP’s Success](#). But remember, early action is key: if you wait until other key project decisions have already been made, it may be too late to go with anything but DBB.

The table below provides an overview of which project delivery method favors which priority, and the guiding questions can help you weigh these factors systematically.

Guiding Questions

1 Legal Feasibility: Are DB and CMAR legally allowed for this project under applicable statutes or local policies?

No

Yes

Use DBB. Where alternative delivery is not permitted, governments can still improve outcomes through strong project scoping, market research, and best value evaluation.

2 Schedule Constraints: Does the project have a firm or time-sensitive deadline? Are there opportunities to save time or money by accelerating portions of construction?

No

Yes

DB is often a strong fit because design and construction can overlap, accelerating project delivery. DB can also unlock the early purchase of long-lead items (such as vehicles or structural materials) that may substantially affect project cost and schedule. CMAR can support time-sensitive projects through early contractor involvement and phased construction, though it typically offers less schedule compression than DB.

3 Parceling: Can the project be broken up into multiple parts, some of which can proceed prior to completion of the design?

No

Yes

DB and CMAR can be particularly effective when a project can be divided into multiple work packages or early action phases. By advancing discrete portions of work while maintaining overall coordination, DB and CMAR can improve cost predictability and schedule performance without requiring full design completion at the outset.

4 Scope Definition: Is the project scope well-defined at the outset, or is it likely to evolve during design?

Yes

DB is often a strong fit because design and construction can overlap, accelerating project delivery. DBB can also work well when requirements are clear and stable, though delivery is sequential.

No

CMAR may be preferable, as it allows contractor input during design and maintains owner control over design decisions.

5 Cost Certainty: Is early cost certainty a top priority for the project?

Yes

DB or CMAR can provide earlier pricing, often through a fixed price or Guaranteed Maximum Price (GMP).

No

DBB may be appropriate, with construction pricing established after the design is complete.

6 Design Collaboration: Are you looking for expert input from the contractor during the design phase?

Yes

DB or CMAR allows governments to better leverage contractor expertise during design.

No

DBB may be appropriate when the owner prefers to complete design independently and engage the construction contractor after design is finalized.

7 Owner's Role: How actively do you want to engage in reviewing and shaping design decisions during project development?

Yes

DBB and CMAR both support a high level of staff engagement through design, as the owner retains a separate A&E contract and can remain closely involved in design evolution, with CMAR adding collaborative input from the CM.

No

Under DB, the owner sets performance goals and outcomes early, while the design-builder develops detailed solutions that meet those requirements.

8 Capacity: Do you have sufficient staff experience and capacity to manage a more complex delivery method?

Yes

If your project team has more capacity and experience, DBB, DB, and CMAR are all viable options.

No

DB can be more complex to procure due to the need for detailed performance requirements and risk allocation upfront, but it often simplifies contract management after award through a single point of responsibility. DBB is more familiar to many public agencies but can require greater owner involvement and coordination during construction. If you have limited DB experience, you may want to consider a project with low or moderate complexity and low to medium risk to build internal capacity with DB, using it as an opportunity for learning and continuous improvement.

Decision-Making Framework

	Owner Control	Speed	Schedule Certainty	Cost Certainty	Administrative Burden
DBB	High	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Low for procurement Moderate for contract management
DB	Low	High	High	High	High for procurement Low for contract management
CMAR	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

How do I build a project delivery team?

Many times, governments underestimate what it takes to build an effective team to oversee a project, including the effort required to provide sufficient data to designers and contractors. This information may include details about existing site conditions, geotechnical reports, utility locations, traffic patterns, environmental constraints, property ownership records, and historical building or infrastructure plans. Having reliable data helps designers develop accurate plans and allows contractors to price work more confidently, reducing the likelihood of costly surprises during construction. It may be helpful to hire an owner's representative early in the decision-making process to help with procurement of design and construction partners. Owner's representatives can be helpful mediators in disputes between project partners. For example, a contractor and designer might disagree about whether an unexpected site condition requires a design change or whether the contractor should have anticipated it in their bid. An owner's representative can help evaluate the technical information, interpret the contract requirements, and facilitate a resolution that keeps the project moving forward while protecting the government's interests. Governments will also need sufficient legal resources (either internal or contracted) to review contracts and interpret how subcontracts are advertised and awarded.

Other potential partners may include specialized firms that can provide more niche services. These may include commissioning agents, who ensure that building systems meet project requirements and design specifications, component experts, who evaluate and test electronic components, or inspectors of key systems such as windows, HVAC, security, and technology. In general, the earlier you can bring these partners into the project, the better: they can often provide specialized feedback on your design plans.

Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to choosing the right delivery method for your project. The right choice depends on the complexity of your project, your government's goals, and the resources at your disposal. What is important is to choose your project delivery early, when you have the widest array of options available to you. For instance, the more design, planning, and permitting advance, the less attractive DB or CMAR may become. From there, as long as you're aligning decision-making criteria with your strategic priorities for the project when selecting your delivery method, you're starting your project off on the right foot!

Appendix: Variations in Project Delivery Methods

Construction Manager Multi-Prime (CMMP): an alternative approach to traditional construction management in which the owner (the government) contracts directly with multiple prime contractors, and a contracted Construction Manager Advisor (CMA) usually provides oversight and coordination of these primes. This model gives the city greater control over contracting and visibility into trade-level costs but also requires a higher degree of involvement and administrative capacity.

Job Order Contracting (JOC): a type of vendor bench or pool of vendors who are pre-qualified to perform a range of smaller, routine tasks at unit prices. This type of umbrella or indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract provides speed and efficiency for recurring needs such as maintenance, small renovations, and repair projects. For more information about JOC, vendor benches, and pre-qualification, check out our quick read [Optimizing Pre-Qualification Approaches for Fairness, Speed, and Results](#).

Progressive Design-Build (PDB): a blend of the design and construction phases of a project through a phased, collaborative approach that does not lock in all decisions and costs at the start. Unlike DB, PDB commonly places the concept development work (which may include project scoping and preliminary engineering documents) as a joint effort between the government client and the contracted team, with the government selecting a design-builder based on qualifications and then working closely with them to develop the design. A Guaranteed Maximum Price (GMP) is typically set once 60–90% of the design is complete. If the government and selected firm cannot reach an agreement on the price at this stage, another firm can be selected to complete the project through an open bid. This method allows greater flexibility and risk sharing, but it requires significant involvement from government staff.

Public-Private Partnerships (P3s): long-term agreements where a private partner may finance, design, build, operate, and maintain a public facility. These arrangements are best suited for large, complex projects where financing and lifecycle maintenance are critical, such as toll roads.

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