

Digger

Dan Tangherlini to leave GSA in February

By **Jonathan O'Connell** January 15

After nearly three years as administrator of the General Services Administration, Dan M. Tangherlini is leaving the job next month.

Tangherlini took over in the wake of a [scandal over conference spending by the agency](#), and tried to transition the GSA into a more efficient and tech-savvy operation during a period of budget cuts and gridlock on Capitol Hill. His last day will be Feb. 13. [Denise Turner Roth](#), deputy administrator, will serve as an interim replacement until President Obama nominates a permanent successor.

A former Treasury official, Tangherlini said he had expected to leave the administration before even arriving at the GSA but that the agency — despite its reputation as a symbol of government bureaucracy — presented too important an opportunity for him to turn down.

During his tenure, the GSA focused on introducing new technologies, improving the acquisitions process and creating more efficient government workspaces.

“Government can often be frustrating,” he said in an interview. “What you are doing is engaging in the management of billions of dollars of taxpayer money. You have to be super careful with that. There are many many layers of oversight. There are many people with great advice...But the things that might be considered frustration of this work — that’s where there are some of the really exciting opportunities for change.”

He said he was proud at having created a team of tech experts, [called 18F](#) in a nod to the address of the GSA's headquarters, to "[hack bureaucracy](#)" to improve government services, including Web sites and IT.

Locally, he also initiated a series of big ticket real estate swaps — including the [proposed trading](#) of the J. Edgar Hoover FBI headquarters — in order to try to sidestep spending limits imposed by Congress, though there remain major questions about whether the deal will be approved.

Tangherlini's efforts to use government offices more efficiently were on display at the agency's own refurbished headquarters west of the White House, where GSA consolidated 4,000 employees into space once occupied by 2,500, asking employees to reserve desks and meeting space as they would hotel rooms, so fewer desks would go unused.

He instituted similar changes at other agencies as GSA advised them on real estate decisions, regularly suggesting that the same work could be done in less space. The effort to shrink workspaces has generated some pushback, but Tangherlini said that simply having the debate was a success, rather than continuing to rely on a "standard, deeply bureaucratic, hierarchical structure that does not respond as fast as people are asking the government to respond."

"Look, I'm glad we're having a discussion about how much collaborative space we should have because before we weren't. We had a single, monochromatic view of this. People had offices or they had cubicles. What we've done is initiated the debate," he said.

Making progress on major government consolidations has proved more difficult. Tangherlini inherited the plan to consolidate the Department of Homeland Security at the former St. Elizabeths hospital in Southeast D.C., but despite completing a building for the U.S. Coast Guard the entirety of the project is [more than a decade](#) behind schedule and hundreds of millions of dollars over budget.

"I would like to see St E's fully occupied by the Department of Homeland Security. I think we pushed that forward but that's going to take a long time," he said.

To avoid similar problems in building a new home for the FBI, which badly wants out of the dated Hoover Building, Tangherlini proposed trading Hoover to a developer willing to build a new campus of 2.1 million square feet capable of accommodating 11,000 FBI staff.

The idea could allow GSA to fund the new headquarters without seeking congressional appropriations, though experts [doubt](#) the Hoover building will fetch a sufficient haul on the private market. Nonetheless Tangherlini also [proposed](#) trading away real estate south of the National Mall, in an area dubbed [Federal Triangle South](#), for construction services at St. Elizabeths.

He said he believed the FBI consolidation was in a good place as he departed and that it was not reliant on his remaining with GSA to be completed. “We’ve got that into the part of the process where it’s really about the technical merits of the proposals...I’d like people to think that I was running around with a calculator and a slide rule doing that stuff but that really isn’t the case,” he said.

Tangherlini [came](#) to the GSA from the Treasury Department in April of 2012, shortly after former chief [Martha N. Johnson resigned](#) under siege and two of her deputies were forced out following a training conference in Nevada that cost \$823,000, revealed by a scathing report from the agency’s inspector general. Obama [nominated](#) him for the post permanently a little more than a year later and he was [confirmed](#) by the Senate in June of 2013.

Four months ago, a senior western GSA official at the center of the conference scandal was [indicted](#) on five counts of fraud. Tangherlini declined to weigh in on whether the scandal was an isolated incident or the result of a flawed agency-wide culture.

“I’ll leave that for someone else to answer. I think the fact is that what we did was respond to the problems in the IG report and made sure we put systems in to make sure it was close to impossible for something like that to happen again, or as close as humanly possible,” he said.

“We had really lost the faith of the American people,” he added.

Tangherlini said he has not accepted a new job. He is a former city administrator for the D.C.

government and a former interim general manager for Metro. Metro has been seeking a new permanent general manager, but he wasn't raising his hand.

"I've done that job before. I think they might have to find someone who hasn't done it before to do it," he said.

Follow Jonathan O'Connell on Twitter: [@oconnellpostbiz](#)

Jonathan O'Connell has covered land use and development in the Washington area for more than five years.
