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Professional Consultant Selection - Navigating the Process

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Over the years, municipalities have often asked how they can avoid “apples to oranges” comparisons when choosing a professional engineering consultant. Most consider selecting a consultant through the Request for Proposal (RFP) process. While this method of selection is certainly valid, there is another method of consultant selection that many agencies and municipalities have embraced – Quality Based Selection (QBS), or RFQ (Request for Qualifications).

The QBS is a process whereby professional consulting services are procured through a careful and deliberate examination of prospective consultants’ qualifications that are solicited specific to the project being considered. The QBS process is also endorsed by the New York State Society of Professional Engineers (NYSSPE), as well as the American Council of Engineering Companies of New York (ACEC – New York). It is used and frequently mandated for all federal and state agency projects, particularly where grant funding has been awarded. Why? The reasons are multifaceted:

- Allows municipalities and agencies to select the consulting firm or team possessing the best experience, capabilities, technical approach, and quality of personnel matched to the needs of the project and the agency;
- Generates better plans and specifications, resulting in higher quality contract documents that make bidding on and carrying out construction easier and more efficient;
- Fosters the development of innovative, cost-effective design solutions at a fair market value, resulting in lower overall project costs, construction delays, cost overruns, and litigation, and lower operating and ownership costs; and
- Generates design solutions that best meet the

needs of the client and project, emphasizing public health, safety, and quality of life.

Once selected, the municipality or agency works with the consultant to develop a detailed written scope of services that embodies the expectations and desired project outcomes of the client, and defines each task deliverable, and schedules milestones. The consultant can then provide a proposed fee for the agreed upon services and deliverables. Service fees play a part in QBS, but are not the overriding driver of consultant selection that can sometimes happen during an RFP selection process. QBS gives the municipality or agency the flexibility to review and negotiate the proposed fee with the consultant. If the negotiated fee exceeds the available budget, then the scope of service can be revisited to determine opportunities for modifications or reductions that bring the fee in line with the budget while still meeting the client’s project goals and objectives. Ultimately, if a collaborative scope and fee negotiation cannot be resolved, then a move to the next highest qualified consultant can be done.

The QBS process puts a greater emphasis on the quality and level of service, and allows the design professional to fully understand the municipality’s needs and

objectives before providing a fee or schedule. Overall project cost savings can also be had through the QBS process. While the highly qualified and experienced consultant may sometimes have a higher initial fee (for example, for project planning and design), the factors outlined above generally result in overall lower construction costs and omission of errors or mistakes over the life of a successful project. Savings during project construction, which generally represent the bulk of the overall project costs, will often outweigh the sometimes higher initial costs related to planning and design with a well-qualified professional.

Additional information on the QBS process can be found on the American Council of Engineering Companies website (acec.org) as well as the website for the New York State Society of Professional Engineers (nysspe.org).

Why the RFQ may be preferable to the RFP Process:

The traditional approach to soliciting response requests for engineering projects often involves issuing Requests for Proposals (RFPs). The RFP process will focus primarily on specific project details, scope, and cost estimates. Unfortunately, and all too often, the focus of this process can get lost with review committees simply focusing on fee and costs rather than a firm's experience or qualifications to plan and perform the design work needed. Alternatively, the Request for Qualifications (RFQ) or QBS process can often be a more advantageous starting approach for several reasons:

- 1. Emphasis on Expertise:** RFQs prioritize the qualifications, expertise, and experience of the engineering firm rather than just the proposed solution. It allows municipalities to gauge the capabilities and proficiency of firms before diving into project-specific details and experience with costs of like related projects.
- 2. Efficient Selection Process:** By evaluating qualifications first, municipalities can shortlist firms that are best suited for the project based on their experience, technical skills, and industry reputation with references. This streamlines the selection process and ensures that only competent, well-qualified firms proceed to submit detailed proposals.
- 3. Focus on Collaboration:** RFQs encourage a collaborative approach between the municipality and the engineering firm from the onset. By recognizing the firm's capabilities beyond mere cost estimates, it fosters a more cooperative relationship geared towards achieving project success and satisfaction.
- 4. Reduced Redundancy:** RFPs often result in multiple firms submitting detailed proposals, requiring significant time and effort to review each one thoroughly. RFQs mitigate this by filtering out firms without the necessary qualifications, saving both time and resources for both parties involved.
- 5. Risk Mitigation:** Selecting an engineering firm based on qualifications reduces the risk of potential project setbacks or failures. A firm's expertise and experience in similar projects plays a crucial role in delivering successful outcomes.



While both RFPs and RFQs serve their prospective purposes, RFQs offer distinct professional flexibility advantages by focusing on qualifications, expertise, and past performance with similar projects. This approach often ensures a more efficient and collaborative selection process, ultimately leading to better project outcomes for customers as well as for the proposing professional consulting firms.



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