From Courting to Contract

A Behind the Scenes Peek into the Consultant Selection Process

Kate Giberson, Harris & Associates
Debbie Hale, Transportation Agency for Monterey County

For Consultants…..

Government agencies and private consulting firms form a partnership, and it's a process getting from the pre-proposal stage to contractual agreement. Agencies set priorities and raise money, and consulting firms have expertise and short-term resources to get the job done. If the partnership is successful, the consultant-agency team can deliver a project in a manner that is more cost-effective and technically superior to an in-house job. Here are some recommendations for both partners to have a successful Qualifications Based Selection process and form a positive contractual relationship.

Lay the Groundwork – before the RFP is issued

- **Meet with us** to find out which projects are in the pipeline and what our priorities are.
- **Attend APWA events** to learn about what we are working on and what jobs are coming up.

Write an Informative Proposal

- **Ask questions** if the proposal isn't clear– we are only human & we make typos too. That said, we will have to issue an amended RFP if you raise issues that we didn't cover with others.
    - **Send your questions in writing** so that we are clear what the issue is.
    - **Attend the pre-proposers conference** - that is the best venue for raising questions and showing your interest in the project.
- **Get to know the project** that you are proposing on and review the RFP thoroughly. Don't assume that because you have done work for the Agency in the past that you will automatically get the job. Each job is different and requires different expertise and knowledge - and maybe your last contract didn't go too well.
- **Provide up-to-date references**. If your references are too old or are unrelated to the work we won't contact them - we'll call other colleagues & ask for their opinion. Also, don't cite our agency as a reference if you are bidding on our work – we are looking for outside opinions.
- **Be responsive -** Double-check to make sure you responded to all proposal requirements – we are legally bound to reject proposals for not being responsive, even if we like the proposal.
- **Provide suggestions** for improving the scope of work or schedule **–** don't just restate the scope of work. You are bringing expertise to the table that the Agency doesn't have – tell us the best way to approach the work to reach our end goal.
- **Be consistent** – if your org chart doesn't match your budget, we'll ask questions.
- **Explain your team's expertise** but don't claim expertise from people who are not on the team! If your firm has a lot of experience in a given area, but no one who worked on those projects is on your team, it will lower your score.
- **Bring in subcontractors** if you don't have local experience or other expertise.
- **Right-size your team** – big teams can be unwieldy and expensive, with excessive oversight costs; we have to explain the contract budget to our board, funders, & auditors. Bid as the prime contractor if you are going to do most of the work; we don't need to a "popular" firm to be the prime if they are only going to add oversight and meeting costs.
- **Proofread your document** – don't use boilerplate that includes the name of other clients instead of ours...this happens all the time.

- **Write a Focused Proposal -** don't feel the need to provide a lot of extra or repetitive documentation:
    - **Write** crisply, concisely and without jargon or acronyms - your proposal is our best evidence of what your final report will look like, so put your best foot forward. There is no need to include 5-page resumes for every individual who might work on the project.
    - **Include** good visuals – photos, charts, drawings. Show examples of similar work, photos of the project location, or photos of your team members. But remember that visuals are evidence of your final product and they should be well executed.
- **Be on Time!** If your submittal is late, we must reject it – that means that if the deadline is 12:00 noon, 12:01 pm is late.

Give a Great Interview

- **Have each team member speak** about their role in the project. Don't bring a bunch of people to the interview and then have the team leader do all the talking. It is easy to see that you aren't a real team if the leader doesn't allow everyone to contribute.
- **Bring the key team players** to the interviews; if they aren't available, let us know before the interviews and we will see if there is flexibility. Don't bring people to the interview who aren't really a part of the team, but we happen to know them.
- **Go beyond your written proposal –** don't just cover what is in your written proposal - show your understanding of the problem that we are trying to solve and why your team is interested and able to do so.
- **Powerpoint presentations are overused** - usually they just show how bad the team is at creating PowerPoints, and undoubtedly there are technical delays. Boards with project maps or information are easier to use and often more informative in showing the quality of your visual materials.
- **Consider bringing a one-page handout** summarizing why your team is the best choice for the job. (But don't bring a copy of your powerpoint...we have your written proposal.)

Rebound if you are rejected…..

- **Don't call our elected officials and lobby them to select you**. I will never forget that you went behind my back – preserve the long-term relationship.
- **Call the project manager to get a debriefing**, and feel free to ask Executive Management about it also. You will learn the weaknesses in your proposal and show us that you are interested in continuous improvement. Don't take it personally if we didn't select you – look ahead to next time. Every solicitation is competitive, and there are a lot of good firms out there. We just weren't right for each other, this time. There will be other jobs in the future.
- **Give us helpful suggestions** if we can improve our process for next time.
- **Partner with another firm** if your company lacks local experience or expertise in a given area - that is often the best way to get your foot in the door and show us what you can do.
- **Attend APWA and other professional association meetings** so that you network and learn about the next opportunity!

Debrief if you are selected

So, you've been selected, congratulations!

When the project is finished, do a debrief to make sure we have all the pertinent deliverables and back up information, and…

- **Ask what went well, and what both parties could improve upon for next time.**

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For Public Agencies…..

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<u>Lay the Groundwork - before RFP is issued:</u>

- **Allow** us to meet with you to find out which projects are in the pipeline and what your priorities and needs are. (We're finding more agencies are not willing to meet.)
- **Share** information through APWA and other professional organization events and notices.
- **Provide** a heads-up that the RFP is forthcoming. Providing 2-4 weeks advance notice enables interested consultants to get up to speed and form teams prior to RFP release.

<u>Prepare an Informative RFP that Provides:</u>

- **Background** on the project history and need, and where to find relevant information.
- **Proposal outline** with clear sections and what you want in each enables you to compare apples to apples. Only present the outline once (we often see inconsistent outlines in multiple places).
- **Clear scope and expected deliverables.** We often assume agencies know what's needed. Clarify where scope is set and where our expertise/input is needed prepare responsive approach.
- **Evaluation criteria** and scoring breakdown – in alignment with the proposal outline.
- **Funding and budget** information, which allows us to identify funding agency requirements (e.g., Caltrans tech studies) and to tailor the scope to budget constraints.
- **Schedule** information for both the proposal process and project implementation. For proposal, allow at least 4 weeks to prepare a proposal (6-8 weeks for complicated projects); ensure key agency staff are available; and indicate selection date.
- **List of stakeholders**, internal and external, can inform the approach.
- **Sample agreement and insurance requirements** with consultant providing any comments in sealed fee envelope.
- **Page limit** in line with requested information and with clear instructions (e.g., list what info can be included in an appendix outside page limits, does the cover letter count), even specifying how many pages for each section of the outline can help the agency compare apples to apples.
- **Preferences** for local or DBE/SBE firms (and any assigned weight) should be clear.
- **Instructions for questions.** Releasing the Q&A as questions arise avoids duplicate questions, delays in receiving answers and allows follow-up questions before deadline (which should not be too close to proposal deadline).
- **Hard copy v. electronic submittals.** We're seeing a trend toward electronic submittals. Hard copies – more can go wrong (e.g., delivery mishaps), review can be cumbersome (e.g., carrying around 10 copies v laptop review), and it's not environmentally friendly. Electronic copies – issues with file size can be avoided by uploading to .ftp site or providing flash drive.

Hold a Pre-Proposal Meeting on Large/Significant Projects

- **Expand** on information that is hard to present in RFP, gauge interest, and conduct additional outreach if attendance is light.
- **Allow** Consultants to ask questions.
- **Specify** if the meeting is mandatory or not (if mandatory, the agency can gauge who is submitting).

Create Interviews that Reduce Stress and Bring out the Best

- **Interview a Short list**. Don't interview all proposers; if we weren't in the top 3 proposals, end our futile effort.
- **Let us Know the Setting**. Provide information to the extent it's known such as room size, available technology (e.g., projector, screen/wall), panelists (how many and whom), etc.
- **Provide Guidance on your preferred Format**. Which do you prefer: a formal presentation, informal discussion, power points (more agencies seem to be moving away from power points), display boards, handouts, Q&A. We find a hybrid approach works well, with plenty of time to informally discuss key issues and approach. Providing questions ahead of time can result in more comprehensive and meaningful answers. Reacting on the fly isn't how we do our jobs and doesn't' always reflect our best selves.
- **Provide Enough Time.** Allow plenty of time for each interview (e.g., 60-75 min), and tell us how much time should be spent on each component (presentation, questions, discussion). Spread out interviews to allow plenty of time for one group to leave before another arrives.

Provide Selection/Notification Information

- **Don't keep us waiting!** We anxiously await. The anticipated selection and notification date should be included in the RFP, so we know when to expect it; and the agency should communicate if there are delays.
- **Communicate details.** We want to know who won and where we ranked, either in a letter or by email/phone.

Accommodate Requests for Debriefs

- **Debriefs** are a sincere effort to learn how the selection was made and how we can improve.
- **Allow a debrief** immediately after approval of the contract; allow 20-30 minutes.