



Choosing consultants: cost-effective options

By William L. Ohm, PE

Here is the scenario. Your city, town, or village has a series of infrastructure projects that must be implemented.

Some must be wrapped up this summer, and others won't even come before the governing board for three or four years. As the Director of Public Works (DPW), you know that much of this work will have to be let to an outside contractor. The question remains, what will be your most time efficient and cost effective solution? Hire architectural/engineering (A/E) firms on a project-by-project basis or hire one firm to complete all of your projects within the next five years.

The latter option, a "term engineer" concept, is an A/E firm who can provide all of the services you will need on an as needed basis.

What are the advantages?

The most obvious advantage is the cost savings associated with consultant selection. Writing and posting project notices, mailing request for proposals, reviewing statements of qualifications, interviewing consultants is all reduced to a one-time event. The town board and/or public works committee won't have to meet and review selections for each and every project. Once selected, most A/E firms deliver engineering services on a time-and-materials basis.



Not having to go through a consultant selection and moving directly to negotiation for a specific project increases the speed with which a project can kick-off and be completed. The relationship also improves response to emergency situations.

A less tangible advantage is trust. In a "term engineering" relationship, the consultant is no longer trying to get your business. They know they'll get the job eventually, so pressure to do the project now and go for big budget are negated. A term engineer gives you someone with whom you can frankly discuss problems, and more importantly, opportunities which have not been pursued to date.

When is a good time?

Timing for consultant selection is critical only in the amount of time you set aside. The earlier you begin, the more comprehensive your research, the more confident you become in your final selection. The idea behind the term engineer concept is that you don't have to go through the selection process over-and-over.

You want to start early in the process, so that you have enough time to make a selection that will stand the test of time.

Where? How do you find the "right" consultant?

As DPW, who do you turn to for advice on whom to approach as a possible term engineer? Go to the sympathetic ear of peers. Ask your counterparts in neighboring communities. Talk to other DPWs at municipal conferences. These are the people who won't mince words and will give you candid advice on the thorny issue of good and bad A/E firms.

Check out web sites and request a statement of qualifications from firms that meet your basic criteria. After you have narrowed the field to three or four firms, invite the person who will be your primary point of contact to come in for a face-to-face meeting.



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What characteristics should be considered?

To cover every type of development project in your community's future, you will need a full service A/E firm. Initially you should look for the basics in planning, you will want a firm that can offer:

- Potable water, wastewater, storm water engineering
- Road, bridge, and bike path engineering
- Public building architecture and engineering
- Survey and mapping

Many A/E firms are offering supplemental services which can make your life easier, such as environmental scientists, historic preservationists, and grant writers. A newer area of service is public relations support that can assist you with public outreach efforts in the form of newsletters, web sites, promotional brochures, and point-of-purchase displays.

Longevity of relationships says something, but any A/E firm worth their salt can claim at least 50 percent of their clients are repeat. The question becomes a matter of degrees: a 50 percent return of clients versus an 80 percent return of clients.

The critical difference between a good consultant and a bad one is the time-worn adage "on time and under budget," but promises don't hold water. Ask for proof in the form of project examples and client references.



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