

Quality Construction begins with Quality Plans

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Those involved in the construction industry understand the importance of quality project documents. Good project planning, scoping and design are the foundation for a successful construction project. Selecting the proper professional to design a project ultimately determines whether or not the owner will receive a good set of plans to work from. Furthermore, experienced owners understand that selecting a design professional using a low bid system does not provide them the best value for the dollar. If you needed heart surgery, would you choose a doctor based on the lowest price? Or would you search for a qualified doctor who had successfully performed this operation many times before? The answer is clear. Design professional firms do not sell a commodity, but provide technical expertise, innovation and the latest technology that can result in substantial cost savings over the life of a project.

So how do owners select the right designer for a given project? The majority of government agencies use a Qualifications-Based Selection (QBS) process that utilizes qualifications, experience and past performance as factors for selection. When Federal dollars are involved, this is often the requirement.

QBS: A HISTORY LESSON

Prior to 1939, government employees typically performed architecture and engineering (A/E) work on federal projects. However, a 1939 statute (Public Law No. 76-43) directed federal agencies to contract with private firms. In doing so, government managers recognized that the expertise and innovation brought by the private sector improved the aesthetic, functional, and safety characteristics of structures while minimizing the life cycle, operations and maintenance costs.

While quality and on-time delivery quickly became trademarks of the private sector in serving government clients, the role that cost should play in the procurement of these services remained an open question.

The Brooks Act (Public Law 92 582), enacted in 1972, put this question to rest. The new law sought “to clarify the legality of the traditional manner in which federal departments and agencies select architects and engineers to perform services in the federal government.” The Brooks Act codified into federal law the selection process known as qualifications-based selection (QBS), in which contracts for design services are negotiated on the basis of demonstrated competence and qualification for the type of professional services required at a fair and reasonable price.

Unlike solicitations based solely on price, agencies using QBS publicly solicit A/E services, create a short list from qualified candidates, rank them, and begin negotiations with the top-ranked firm to determine the scope of the project, before price is ever discussed. If the parties are unable to agree on the terms of a

contract, the agency is free to begin negotiations with the next ranked firm. QBS does not negate price as an eventual factor for contract negotiations with the design professional.

With the increase in economic pressures in Michigan, owners must not lose site of the benefits of hiring the best qualified design professional for their projects. In most cases, the fees for these services amount to less than 5% of the total cost of a project but have a profound effect on the remaining 95%. Quality plans will result in better construction bids, fewer change orders and lower maintenance costs. Developing a process that allows owners to truly understand the capabilities of a design professional, work together with the designer to develop the project scope and determine alternative materials and designs will result in quality projects that minimize long-term costs.

“It is unwise to pay too much, but it’s worse to pay too little. When you pay too little, you sometimes lose everything because the thing you bought was incapable of doing the thing you bought it to do.”

-John Ruskin (1819-1900)

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