Caution! Selecting your design professional solely on price can be costly

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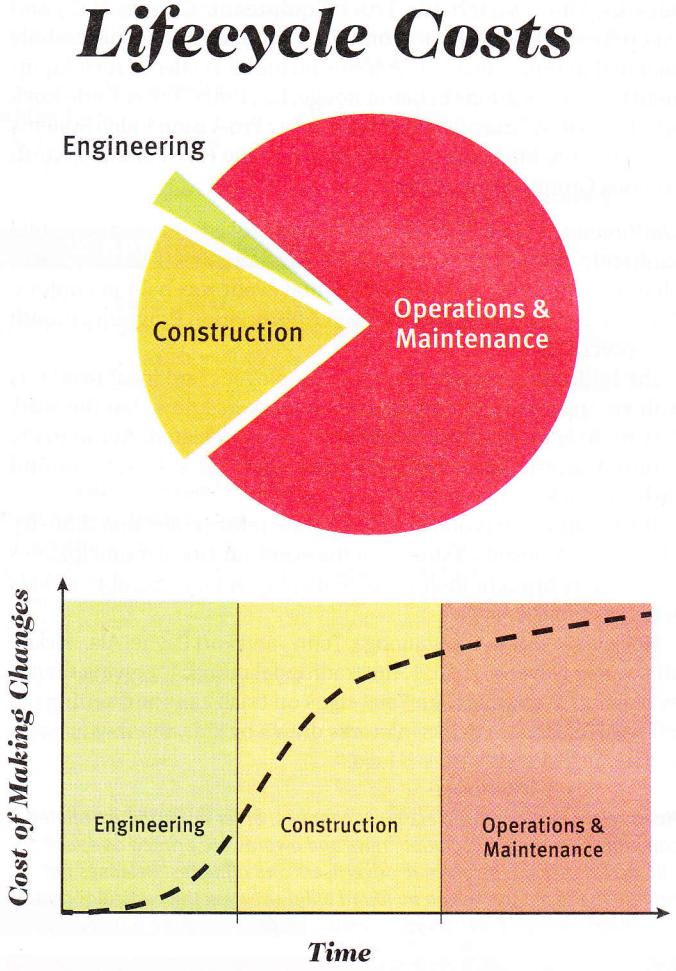
THE TEMPTATION FOR MUNICIPALITIES to select design professionals based on the lowest bid for their infrastructure improvement projects has grown as public agencies struggle to absorb budget shortfalls. Unfortunately, many officials soon discover that trying to cut corners on engineering and design is not in the long-term best interest of the project or the community.

Design professionals like engineers, architects, etc., have the greatest potential to influence the short- and long-term success of a construction project. Although engineering fees typically account for less than 5 percent of a projects lifecycle costs, the final design can have a significant effect on the remaining 95 percent of a project's costs for construction, operation and maintenance.

Furthermore, the time to implement the best solutions is during design, not during construction or later. The costs to implement changes are the lowest during design.

Because a quality design has such a major effect on a project, selecting a design professional should not be taken lightly. All architectural and engineering firms are not the same, and owners should review qualifications, experience and past performance to ensure they are hiring the right firm for a given project. A decision based on price alone excludes many other important factors that bring quality and long-term viability to a project. For instance, innovation and the use of new technology can result in major cost savings for a community. A design professional that delivers concise project drawings and specifications can reduce change orders and costly litigation.

Procuring design professionals using a qualifications-based approach also gives owners an opportunity to interview the firms before selection. Owners can experience firsthand how the firm communicates and can ask questions that would not be afforded under a low bid process. Then, after you make your selection, you have the benefit of developing a detailed scope of services with the professional so that each party is clear on what is expected. This will improve trust, reduce misunderstandings and will ultimately get the best price because costs are not added for unknowns and uncertainties.



Municipalities should review their procurement policies to ensure they are not treating professional services like a commodity. Buying office supplies is not the same as hiring an engineer, and the procedures should reflect the difference. When you hire a design professional, you are buying their knowledge, expertise and experience. Caution: If you select your professional based solely on the lowest price, you may get what you paid for.

"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)