

QUALIFICATIONS BASED SELECTION – WHAT IS IT?

By Charles Fielder, AIA, Past Chairman of QBS Colorado

According to the American Bar Association, the American Public Works Association, the American Institute of Architects, the American Consulting Engineers Council and the Association of General Contractors, Qualifications Based Selection (or QBS) is the BEST method for procuring professional services. It is required for Federal (Brooks Act) and State (“mini” Brooks bill) projects and is normally used by private sector clients. Local government agencies and school districts are also finding QBS practice to be in their best interest. Colorado has its own QBS committee available at www.acec-co.org.

In the QBS process, the client issues a Request for Qualifications only, (no Request for Proposals), from consultants and selects the best qualified firms (usually 3 –5) for an interview. The Request for Qualifications (RFQ) should include the following items:

Firm description, experience of key personnel, management plan and roles, experience on similar projects, unique or relevant experience, capability to meet schedule, quality assurance program, familiarity with project location and climate and location of firm’s offices. Consultants respond with the following items: Brief firm history (how long it’s been done), resume (who will do it), project approach (what will be done, how it will be done and who will do what), references (who it’s been done for), experience (how it’s been done before), workload (how long it will take to do it), quality control (how well it’s done), project location (how it’s been done there before) and location of firm (where it’s really done) and why they are the BEST team. The client evaluates the responses based on project team experience, management and organization, design abilities, experience on similar projects and unique qualifications. Consultants having successful responses are invited to interview.

During the interview, the client learns first hand what special skills and unique approaches to the client’s project each firm offers. Interview criteria includes: General professional experience, relevant project experience, subconsultants experience, project approach, project manager’s experience, staff, resources and workload and quality of presentation. The best qualified firm is then selected based on competency, design and technical abilities, experience and availability of staff to complete the project according to the client’s schedule. Together, the client and selected consultant develop a scope of services and the consultant submits a fee proposal directly related to the agreed upon scope. Then the client and consultant negotiate a mutually acceptable agreement. If an agreement cannot be reached, the client terminates negotiations with the first firm and begins negotiations with the second most qualified firm. Price is NOT, (and should not be), the determining factor in selecting qualified firms.

Selecting a professional based on the lowest fee is no more appropriate than choosing the cheapest surgeon, lawyer, accountant, dentist or babysitter. Experience and trust are required in a business relationship that may last several years. Bidding and lowest fee hiring practices will inevitably result in poor service, inferior design, inadequate construction, unmet expectations, misunderstandings on scope and increased legal exposure for all parties.

Services that are procured on a competitive basis, be it 2 envelope system, 2 steps or just an outright request for proposal, are not following standard industry practice and are more concerned with price than quality. “The bitterness of cheap quality remains long after the sweetness of low price is forgotten.”

The goal is for the client to receive quality, affordable services culminating in a quality constructed project. The goal for the consultant is to receive a fair fee for delivering quality services and a quality project. Quality Based Selection is a WIN-WIN situation.