

TEN TIPS TO HELP COMMUNITIES HIRE AN ENGINEER

If you need major work done on your community's water system, you will also need to hire an engineer. Hiring one is one of the first steps in the planning phase of a construction project. Once selected, an engineer is involved in nearly every aspect of the project, including identifying alternative solutions, evaluating financing options, completing designs, obtaining permits, bidding the project, and the construction. So you want to make sure you hire the right person for the job.

Here are some pointers for engineering the best hire possible:

1. Know what your project is before you begin. Communities should develop a detailed project summary that states specifically what the problem is that needs to be solved, a narrative describing their existing facilities, and ideas the community has for solving the problem (i.e., potential sites where infrastructure could be located, type of infrastructure preferred, etc.).
2. Establish a selection committee that will review qualifications, conduct interviews, and recommend a firm to the governing body. Use existing community resource people in your area. These could include the sanitary engineer for your county, local community and economic-development staff, a contractor or person who understands water and/or wastewater projects who resides in your community, your local water/wastewater superintendent, your town administrator, members of the board of public affairs, your CEO, your CFO, or members of your governing body who have experience with water and/or wastewater construction projects.
3. Develop a unique request for qualifications (RFQ) that challenges engineering firms to do some work in order to meet the requirements of the RFQ. Don't just use the same RFQ sample that engineers are used to, or you will get the same information they send to all clients. An example might be to challenge engineers to provide a one-page summary of recommendations as part of their qualifications on how to solve the problem you are seeking engineering services for in the first place. Develop a system for evaluating the RFQs.
4. Request in the RFQ that engineering firms provide to you a list of all water/wastewater projects they have worked on in the past 5 years. This approach is more effective than asking for three references because you will have a list of all their projects, not just the ones that were successful. A detailed schedule depicting the consulting engineer's interpretation of the required tasks and time required to accomplish each may be requested, along with an organizational chart depicting lines of authority and responsibility within the project team as well as roles of the key personnel assigned to the project.
5. Insist that engineers meet with your community's officials (village administrator, water or wastewater superintendent, etc.) and conduct a preliminary tour of the community and project site before submitting their qualifications.
6. Develop a list of interview questions that focus on the type of project you need to complete. Don't just use interview questions that engineers hear at each interview they attend. Be creative and ask questions that will challenge engineers to think on their feet. Communities must remember that at no time during the RFQ or interview process are they allowed to ask about the cost of services. Some states have laws that say that costs for services cannot be discussed until firms have been evaluated and ranked accordingly using qualifications-based selection criteria.
7. Don't try to interview too many firms, and make sure you provide adequate time for each interview. Generally, 3 to 5 firms is a good number of firms that a community should interview. Conduct the interviews consecutively in one day, and allow enough time to successfully determine if each firm has what you are looking for. Interviews should be no less than 30 minutes each and should be scheduled to allow for a brief presentation by each firm followed by questions from the community.

8. Make it clear to engineering firms that you want the project manager who would be working on your project to attend the interview. It is very important that communities get a feel for what the project manager is like, his/her demeanor, does he/she listen to you during the interview, etc. The most important mental question during the interview should be Can we work as a team with this person (the project manager)?
9. Advertise the RFQ as much as possible. Send the RFQ to a large newspaper, not just your local newspaper. Talk with the communities around you, and ask them whom they have worked with in the past, and send the RFQ to those engineering firms. Send the RFQ to firms that have visited with your local officials in the past. Get a list of engineers from your state engineers association, and select firms near your area to send the RFQ to.
10. Remember that you are not required to enter into contract with the firm that is ranked the highest after the interviews are conducted. At this point, it is appropriate to request a detailed fee proposal covering the scope of proposed engineering services to be performed and the basis of compensation for those services. Once the fee proposal has been received, negotiations may begin relative to scope of services, contract language, and fee payment schedule. If a community cannot reach an agreement with the highest-ranked firm in regards to the cost of their services, they need to remember that the law states that they can negotiate with the second-ranked firm, then the third-ranked firm, etc. until the community is able to negotiate a fair price with a firm. If the community cannot reach an agreement with any of the firms interviewed, they must begin the entire process over.

For addition information or assistance, including specific state requirements, contact the office for your region of RCAP.

This list was developed by Great Lakes RCAP.