

# Engineers and Municipalities

Municipalities have limited staff to solve technical road and bridge problems or to design projects. They must hire engineering consultants to fill these needs. This article describes developing a relationship with engineering firms and the best way to choose one.

## Choosing the Firm

Above all else, engineers must have sufficient technical and legal knowledge. Because the most qualified engineers are seldom the cheapest, selection should not be based on their fee. Therefore, cities and towns should issue a request for qualifications (RFQ), rather than a request for proposal (RFP). An RFQ asks for the firms' experience and expertise. Unlike an RFP, the fee is secondary to qualifications.

When drafting and evaluating the RFQ, municipal officials should consider:

- Personal Chemistry.
- Experience.
- Expertise in Regulations.
- Familiarity with Municipal Work

**Personal Chemistry.** Communication and mutual respect are essential between engineers and city/town officials. Disagreements about the scope of work are the most frequent cause of a strained relationship. The RFQ must clearly describe the scope of work.

**Experience.** For a specific problem, the municipality should hire an expert in that technical area. For periodic consultation, or for a road or bridge project, it should seek a firm capable of dealing with many engineering issues. The RFQ should ask for evidence of applicable expertise and experience.

**Expertise in Regulations.** Federal and state laws impact nearly all road and bridge projects. Municipalities must rely on the engineer to inform them of laws and to bring them into compliance. The selected engineering firm should have an established relationship with appropriate officials. This enables their knowing specifics of existing rules and keeping abreast of changing regulations and permits.

**Familiarity with Municipal Work.** Municipal officials often want their consultant to

be accessible for citizen's meetings. Officials should ensure that selected engineers present plans and alternatives clearly to lay audiences.

## Contract Term

For a single project a city/town selects a firm to complete a specific venture. The firm's scope of work is clear and its task set. The relationship ends at project completion.

In a long-term relationship, the municipality pays the firm to oversee its interests when requested. Such arrangements often save money in the long run, and prevent problems arising from using different firms for each project. They provide continuity and require less time to answer questions. Engineers and city/town officials share a vision of where the community is going and historical knowledge of where it has been.

## Get it in Writing

To ensure a solid municipality-engineer relationship, anything important should be in writing. It is especially important to write and distribute responsibilities and expectations.

For focused and productive meetings,

- Establish a written meeting schedule and an agenda for each meeting,
- Document action items and responsibilities.
- Take notes and send copies to everyone as soon as possible.

Conversations, especially involving decisions, should be documented and shared. Any hint of confused responsibilities should be quickly addressed and clarified in writing.

## From Start to Finish

A municipality benefits when engineers are involved from project conception to completion. Engineering during project development usually reduces construction costs. Moreover, engineers clear about municipality needs provide the best services. If engineers are involved from project conception, unpleasant surprises and unrealistic expectations are less likely.

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# Telephone Etiquette

by Beth Terney, Project Assistant

Many residents contact their highway department only by telephone. The first contact for many others is by phone. Their opinion, therefore, will depend on how department employees answer the phone and talk on it.

## Answering the Phone

Although difficult, one should stay calm and respectful when dealing with irritated callers. The best course is to acknowledge the caller's frustration, and try to solve the problem. The employee should never attack in return.

## Taking and Leaving Messages

Employees should answer phones promptly and politely. They should slowly and clearly identify themselves and the office. They should be positive, helpful, and give the caller their full attention. If background noise cannot be stopped, they should take the call in a quiet location.

Inaccurate messages, or calls not returned, reflect badly on a department. A pad of paper and pencil should be near the phone. Employees should know where to leave messages. Messages should contain the caller's name, company, phone number, and other important information. Reading back the information ensures accuracy. Initialing the message tells the recipient who took it.

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## Invest the Time

In the end, the municipality and the engineer must commit to each other. For long term arrangements, it can take a year to establish a good relationship, and to define mutual expectations. If these do not occur after a year, the city/town should seek a new firm. Ideally, a long-term relationship leads to better communication, increased trust, and a better knowledge of what each party needs.

When leaving messages, one should speak clearly, slowly, and leave a brief but complete message. It is best to decide what to say before calling, including one's name, company, phone number, and the date, time, and purpose of the call. Leaving the best time to call back makes returning calls less inconvenient. Slowly repeating one's name and number at the end ensures accuracy.

## Answering Machines

Recorded answering machine messages should be brief and clear beginning with the name of the person or organization who owns the machine. Instructions for leaving messages should be clear. If applicable, the message should tell where to call in case of an emergency.

## Conclusions

People can be challenging. Common courtesy can give them a positive impression of a highway department.

Sources:

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Levy, Karen. "Telephone Manners." *Proper Business Telephone Etiquette*. [http://schs.esu7.org/pages/HOME/PAGE/Telephone\\_Manners.html](http://schs.esu7.org/pages/HOME/PAGE/Telephone_Manners.html), July 2001.

A municipality must define its needs clearly, pick the firm that best meets them, and invest time. A well managed partnership results in better roads and bridges, and lower costs, for residents.

Source

Minster, James J. "Engineers and Municipalities." *Public Works Magazine*, July 2001