

Developing a Request for Proposal

Updated by Sarah Sunderman, Research Assistant/December 2009

Developing a well-written request for proposal can be a daunting task. It takes time, careful thought, and planning. However, a well-written RFP can help form the foundation of a successful relationship with a vendor and provide important goods and services to your county.

Important Definitions to Know

To start, it is important to explain the difference between a request for proposal, a request for information, a request for quotation, and a bid.

- A **request for proposal (RFP)** is a solicitation inviting proposals from vendors who believe they can provide the products and/or services your county needs. It is also a formal and binding document. A RFP describes the products and/or services needed, but can also ask vendors to propose a solution to one of the county's needs.
- A **request for information** or a request for interest (RFI) is a non-binding document that is issued when a county is considering the acquisition of a particular service or product. The purpose of a RFI is to solicit information and/or to determine the level of vendor interest in providing a service or product.
- A **request for quotation (RFQ)** is the most informal of the three types of requests. This kind of quotation is typically used for low-dollar purchases. A verbal price quotation, telephone

quote, or faxed quotes are three examples of a RFQ.

- A **bid** is a formal, binding document used to obtain pricing from vendors for a specific period of time. It contains complete specifications of the goods or services requested by the county. A bid also includes payment terms, delivery requirements, and other conditions that define the scope of the purchase. Bids are used to establish contracts for the county for products or services or for one-time purchases of high-dollar items (usually over \$1,000).

Benefits of using a RFP

- Common format allows for easy comparison of proposals.
- Establishes a level playing field by specifying the evaluation to be used and incorporates by reference other contractual terms and conditions applicable to the procurement.

RFPs: Use, Preparation, and Evaluation

A RFP is generally used when other factors in addition to price and delivery are important in the procurement. If



your county is installing a county-wide fiber optic network, successful experience installing a fiber optic network, the cost of materials and labor, and the ability to schedule and coordinate the installation with minimum disruption to county operations are all important factors.

Tips for writing a RFP

- Before you begin writing your RFP, obtain examples of RFPs for similar products/services from neighboring counties or from other departments within your county. These examples may give you ideas of things to include. They can also alert you to things you may want to avoid.
- Include enough information in your RFP so that the vendor has a good idea of the product/result you expect.
- Limit the amount of space vendors can use to respond to your RFP. Limiting space forces vendors to respond to the RFP in a concise and exact manner.

RFPs can take many different forms depending upon the county, department, and the purpose. However, there are some basics that all RFPs should contain.

Purpose/General Information

The first section usually identifies the purpose of the RFP, the name of the person in the county to contact for further information, and specific instructions for submitting proposals, such as the number of copies required for submission. This section can also contain a timetable of dates relevant to proposal submission and the project.

Specifications

The specification section is one of the more important sections of the RFP because the quality of the specifications will determine the quality of the proposal and the quality of the final product or service. Examples of the types of information contained in the specifications are performance criteria, work to be completed, experience, qualifications of offerors, scheduling, delivery,



references, financial information, service contracts, and similar items. Proposals that fail to meet the specifications should not be evaluated further and should not be selected by the county.

Evaluation Criteria

The evaluation criteria should be explained in the RFP. The evaluation criteria section can explain how each criterion will be weighted. A simplified example is: Experience 25%, Quality of Offeror 30%, Cost 25%, and Schedule 20%. The criteria should directly relate to the specifications. Each specification should fit into one of the evaluation criteria. If a specification does not fit into your evaluation criteria, there is no method of considering the vendor's response to that specification.

How to Improve the Quality of Vendor Proposals

There are several steps your county can take to increase the quality of proposals that are submitted by vendors.

Details, Details, Details

As mentioned before, it is very important to provide enough details in your RFP to allow vendors to write a good proposal. The more detail you provide, the more accurately vendors will be able to respond. In particular, if you are able to define the scope and boundaries of the project in detail, vendors will be able to more accurately estimate the resources they will need to commit to the project.

Pre-proposal conference

Another way to improve the quality of proposals your county will receive is to invite vendors to a pre-proposal conference. Local governments increasingly use pre-proposal or "start-up" conferences to ensure that RFP requirements are understood and that as many potential problems as possible are identified and addressed up front before the proposals are



submitted. In order for the vendors to get the most out of the pre-proposal conference, it is best to hold one-on-one sessions with each vendor. One-on-one sessions will allow vendors to feel more at ease when asking questions because they can protect their ideas from competing vendors.

Addendum

It is never too late to make changes to your RFP, even after it has been issued. An addendum can be an effective and important tool in the RFP process. After a RFP has been issued, mistakes can be corrected and changes can be made to any part of the RFP by issuing an addendum to all vendors. Although it may create more work for the vendor, it will help ensure that the county gets exactly what it wants and needs from the vendor.

How to Select the Right Vendor

The following are tips for selecting the right vendor for your county:

- Contact other local governments who have issued similar types of RFPs and ask them for a list of good vendors they have worked with recently.
- Ask for several references from prior customers and check them out.
- Ask for samples of other RFP proposals they have completed.

Internet Resources

- ✦ **The National Institute of Governmental Purchasing, Inc.**
<http://www.nigp.org/eweb/>
- ✦ **National Association of Stat Procurement Officials**
<http://www.nigp.org/eweb/>
- ✦ **National Contract Management Association**
<http://www.ncmahq.org/>
- ✦ **Mercer County, NJ - 2010 County RFP Questions and Answers**
http://www.state.nj.us/counties/mercer/departments/pdfs/hs_qnarfp2010.pdf
- ✦ **Cuyahoga County, OH**
adpboard.cuyahogacounty.us/pdf/RFPTEMPLATE.doc
- ✦ **Durham County, NC**
www.ipma-hr.org/pdf/rfp/DNCgen.pdf
- ✦ **McAfee Foundstone**
www.foundstone.com/us/services/foundstone_rfp_template.doc
- ✦ **Georgia Tech's Center for Education Integrating Science, Mathematics, and Computing**
http://www.intelisef2008.org/MM_Tools/RPT.html

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