

# The Alphabet Soup of Purchasing:

## RFPs and Consultants

*Meghan H. Dorsett, AICP*

Requests for proposals (RFPs) vary, or perhaps more precisely, the view of RFPs vary depending on who you talk to. The first time I was asked to write an RFP as a relatively new staff planner, I started by staring blankly at my computer screen and realizing I didn't have a clue how to start an RFP document, much less what to include. Asking the folks who should know (your boss, the purchasing agent for your jurisdiction, someone in another jurisdiction) typically results in different answers, depending on their points of view.

For most new planners, appointed and elected officials new to the process, and citizens, the alphabet soup of purchasing is not only confusing, but can also be intimidating. RFPs. RFQs. RFI. IFBs, and the host of other government abbreviations, part of a language created to simplify the spoken word in government offices, get lost in the translation when you have no point of reference. They have only limited counterparts in the world beyond government agencies and, as far as I remember, were never mentioned in any of the courses I slogged through in graduate school. So I sat at my computer and stared at the screen.

We invited a number of different people to contribute to this issue, based on their expertise and their points of view. Some of their information overlaps, some does not, but if you want to understand RFPs and the process they entail, it is important to view as many perspectives as possible.

Milt Herd (the author of our lead article) is the former Director of Planning for Loudoun County, Virginia and is currently the owner and principal planner for Herd Planning and Design. Milt brings to the table experience both as a public planner and as a consultant, as someone who has written RFPs and has responded to RFPs.

Valerie Tweedie is currently the Director of Finance for Christiansburg, Virginia. Prior to coming to Virginia, Val worked in Michigan, including a stint as a CFO for a number of Native American Tribal Organizations. Like Milt, she brings a wealth of information, but her take on RFPs comes from the finance and purchasing end of the world.

Melissa Scott started life as a consultant and shifted to public planning. She is the GIS Coordinator and former Director of Planning for Greenbrier County, West Virginia. Her perspective on RFPs comes from dealing with the management of an RFP, both in the negotiation process and in the management process.

The second installment in our series on the comprehensive planning process also addresses RFPs, although it focuses on the “off the beaten path” information left out of the first three articles.

The final two articles in working with outside consultants examine the “roads less taken.” The first covers regional councils, including planning district commissions. Diane Zahm looks at the partnership opportunities through universities and cooperative extension programs.

Finally, our “Tools of the Trade” feature examines lateral thinking and the CMapTools concept mapping tool.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *The Community Planner*.

### The Alphabet

IFB-Invitation for Bids

ITB-Invitation to Bid

REA-Request for Equitable

Adjustment

RFB-Request for Bid

RFC-Request for Comments

RFI-Request for Information

RFP-Request for Proposals

RFQ-(1) Request for Qualifications; (2)

Request for

Quotations

[National Institute for Government](#)

[Purchasing Online](#)

[Dictionary](#), which translates the above into English.