What you don't know won't....

A Practical Guide to the Comprehensive Plan (Part 2)

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***Editor's Note**: This article builds off of the "Planning the Planning Process" articles in the first issue (The Community Planner, Volume 1, No. 1) and is the second part in the series on developing a comprehensive plan. Given the fine advice in the other articles in this issue, we have tried not to repeat information, although there are some issues in RFPs that will always be open to debate. (MHD)*

Approaches to Planning

There are four approaches to creating comprehensive plans: 1) do it in-house with existing staff; 2) hire a comprehensive planner for a fixed term (one to two years) to do the project in-house; 3) hire a consulting company or individual consultant to create a "turn-key" plan; an 4) do parts of it in-house with existing staff and contract with either a local planning district commission, a university, or a consultant to do the remaining tasks. Each approach has distinct advantages and disadvantages.

In-house approach. Plans developed in-house have a stronger connection to the community and often incorporate more intensive public input. Because the planners are members of the community and have a greater understanding of the community, their depth of understanding is likely to be reflected in the plan. Comprehensive plans, however, are time intensive and require that the jurisdiction dedicate one full-time staff position to plan development for the duration of the comprehensive planning process.

An additional downside to taking a strictly in-house approach is that your jurisdiction loses out on "new perspectives." It is very easy to get locked into specific approaches to planning and to problem solving. Having an outside perspective helps guard against the tendency to stay with familiar rather than looking for new ways to address old problems.

If you are a large enough jurisdiction, with a long range planner on staff, then creating the plan in-house is a viable option. For most jurisdictions, however, that either have a small planning staff (three or less) or have no staff with specific planning training, the in-house option probably won't work (see the side bar on the next page).

In-house with fixed-time comprehensive planning position approach. One way jurisdictions are getting around staff limitations is by creating a fixed-term (one to two year), full-time long range planning position. The planner works for the jurisdiction for a specific period of time (generally long enough to create the comprehensive plan and complete an ordinance review). As with the traditional in-house approach, hiring a staff planner, for a set salary, means that the jurisdiction can take a more flexible and in-depth approach to public participation and the planner has the opportunity to develop greater connections with the community. While you will have to pay some benefits on top of the negotiated salary, the costs are reasonably predictable, and you will not have to pay "travel costs" (% of hourly wage,

Resources:

[O*Net: Planning Job Description](#) (list of skill sets for planning)

Side Notes: A Planner is a Planner is a Planner …Not Quite.

Imagine that you are sitting in a meeting and the speaker announces that your jurisdiction needs to hire a planning consultant to help develop the long range plan. Your first reaction is "Why…we already have a planner." It is not an unusual reaction nor is it an unusual mistake.

Like engineers and architects, planners come in a broad range of flavors or specialties: transportation, development review, environment, community development, advocacy, long range…the list goes on. Each specialty has its own skill sets. A transportation planner, for example, needs both technical expertise (technical understanding of the broad spectrum of transportation modes, parking design and policies, environmental assessment, impact analysis, etc.) and policy expertise.

General planners (development planners) account for the majority of planners in government staff positions, especially in small towns and rural areas. Either through undergraduate training or, more likely, on-the-job training, general planners specialize in the day-to-day requirements of planning: managing and working with the local planning commission; writing staff analysis reports; an reviewing subdivision plats, rezonings, special use permits, project specific plans, and building permits (where the planning and permits are combined into the same office). They also are called upon to be the "research wing" of local governments: looking up data, researching best practices, answering specific planning related questions, and writing short reports and new ordinance provisions. While they may occasionally work on policy development, policy development and in-depth studies are crammed in between the day-to-day requirements. In addition, general planners, by necessity, tend to be more rule rather than policy focused. Much of the planning they deal with is dictated by the constraints of the local zoning ordinance and the policies established by the elected officials. General planners are, in fact, the backbone of public planning, but given the range of their duties, they often don't have the time or the opportunities to specialize in or to devote energy to large projects. And it is not necessarily fair to ask them to.

Comprehensive planning is, at least to some degree, the esoteric wing of planning, and comprehensive planning specialists represent the minority in the planning field. In some ways, it is useful to think in terms of the debate over the differences between left brain (detail oriented) and right brain ("big picture" oriented) people in considering the difference between general planning and comprehensive planning. General planners deal with the facts and the place, as it exists; comprehensive planners deal with a future place that does not currently exist. Comprehensive planners are, by necessity, policy-oriented and base their work on a combination of historic and current conditions and trends and desires of the community and then formulating a plan that will help the jurisdiction achieve the defined or wished for future. They rarely write documents that are under ten pages, are adept at analyzing qualitative and quantitative data and in-depth research, and develop policy documents rather than ordinances. Unlike some of the more narrowly drawn specialties in planning (transportation, environmental, housing), comprehensive planners are, by necessity, a jack of all trades and a master of none. Perhaps most importantly, comprehensive planners are adept at reaching out to the broader community and the wide-range of stakeholders, building bridges, and finding consensus.

gas, hotel, etc.) or overtime, nor will you have to worry about potential cost overruns. For small, relatively isolated communities or counties with fixed budgets, the approach may offer the best solution.

Turn-key Approach. Turn-key plans are, or have been, the most common approach to creating a local comprehensive plan. A jurisdiction advertises for a consultant or consulting agency to create their comprehensive plan, including conducting the public input process, researching and analyzing the data, formulating the core plan (policies, goals, objectives, strategies, implementation steps, and so forth), and writing and designing the final document.

There are a number of advantages to the turn-key approach. Presumably the consultant or consulting agency has no dog in the hunt and will approach the planning process without preconceived notions or biases;. In addition, they bring fresh perspectives and expertise to the problems or issues facing your jurisdiction. Finally, depending on complexity of the plan, they can bring multiple planners with different areas of expertise to the process.

One common perception is that the turn-key approach will produce a plan while saving your staff from having to devote time to the comprehensive planning process. Although turn-key plans require less direct staff involvement in the actual document development, they do require a significant amount of staff time, especially in terms of oversight and support. In addition, depending on the complexity of the plan and the level of public participation, turn-key plans can be quite expensive, and they may not generate the level of public buy-in or staff buy-in needed to implement a plan or provide the local elected body with political cover. For turn-key plans, or any plans, to be successful, your staff, your planning commission, your elected officials, and your citizens need to be engaged in the process.

Partnership Approach. The partnership approach is, perhaps, the ideal approach to use in developing a comprehensive plan. As the name implies, the partnership approach melds the strengths of the in-house process with the strengths brought by consultants, and is especially well suited for jurisdictions with small budgets (under $100,000).

In the partnership approach, the staff shoulders part of the responsibility and the consultant or consulting agency takes on the balance. Because the staff and the planning commission are involved as partners in the process, there is more likely to be a stronger staff buy-in. The partnership approach requires negotiating the balance of responsibilities between the staff and the consultant. For example, the staff, because of proximity and familiarity, may be better suited to conduct part or all of the public input process with support from the consultant. In another case, the staff may pick up the responsibility of doing background research, data collection and crunching, or mapping. The partnership approach requires knowing the skill sets and strengths of your existing staff before you start and working with the consultant to strengthen the in-house skill sets by providing training while picking up the portions of the process that are either beyond the skills of the staff, require more time than staff can devote without risking other projects or responsibilities, or which really need a new or outside perspective.

Borrowing from Other Jurisdictions

Ninety percent of the planning process is research, or so a professor told me while I was slogging through graduate school. As it turned out, he was right, although it was not something I wanted to hear while I was in the throes of my thesis and wishing my committee an ill fate.

Very little of the process, whether answering a zoning question, designing an approach to the comprehensive plan, creating or recreating a new ordinance, or preparing a request for proposals, is done without extensive research at the front end. Much of the research involves looking at examples, and a good portion of those examples come from neighboring jurisdictions or from quick searches on the internet.

While examples, whether rfp documents or ordinances, provide some guidance and, in some cases, boiler plates for your own efforts, they are also fraught with danger. Not all examples, regardless of the level of detail, are good. There are some basic steps you can take to make sure that the examples you find will serve you well.

Start in Your Neighborhood. If you are researching approaches to a problem or a project, start with the other jurisdictions in your end of the world. It can be assumed that they are dealing with similar characteristics or situations, and have a running start at solutions. This is especially true for bid documents (requests for proposals, requests for bids, etc.), for ordinances, and for developing a project budget. It is often easier to ask a neighboring jurisdiction for a detailed account of the costs of a project (travel expenses, personnel expenses, individual process expenses, etc.) than to ask a jurisdiction outside of your area. If you are in a state where consulting firms are prevalent in only a couple of jurisdictions, knowing, for example, what your neighbors had to pay to cover travel expenses is important. Most jurisdictions are willing to share information, so they should be your first stop in the research process, but make sure you know you questions before you call or email. Don't limit your research to only one other jurisdiction, call at least three to four that you know have gone through the same or a similar process within the past couple of years.

Information more than three years old (outer time frame) is likely to be far less accurate in part because it is not going to reflect the impact of inflation on costs. Like everything else in the economy, consulting costs change from year to year. If you are basing your budget on round figures from more than two to three years prior, do not assume that the amount you are going to have to pay is going to be in the same ballpark. For example, based on a standard cost of living calculation, a plan that cost $70,000 in 2004, will cost you well in excess of $80,000 in 2011, a 15.3% increase. Using the inflation calculator, based on the Consumer Price Index from the Bureau of Labor Statistics yields much the same result. While using “cost of living” or Consumer Price Index/inflation calculators will not going to give you an exact budgetary number, it will tell you, more or less, the rate of increase you may see reflected in the RFP responses and lessen the chances of sticker shock.

Ask for a copy of their plan, if you do not already have a copy on your shelf, and for a list of planning consultants they have used in the past.

Resources:

American Institute for Economic Research: Cost of Living Calculator

Bureau of Labor Statistics Inflation Calculator

Stay in Your State for Legal... The internet has made intrastate and interstate research far easier but generates a whole different set of problems, not the least of which is that the circumstances in one place may not line up well with those in another.

For documents and information that have a legal base (ordinances, procurement documents, agreements), try, if possible, to use examples or templates created by a jurisdiction within your state. This is especially important if you are located in a Dillon Rule state where the state legislature dictates the dance.

If you are looking at plans from other jurisdictions, as rule of thumb is pick jurisdictions that have populations no more than 20% above and no less than 20% below your jurisdiction's population. The materials and approaches included in the sample plans will be a better fit because of similar population, tax structure, and resources than from areas significantly larger, with more resources, or significantly smaller with fewer or little resources.

Resources:

[State Chapters: American Planning Association]

A second method of choosing jurisdictions is to ask your finance officer which jurisdictions they use for comparative studies. The folks on the finance and administrative sides of local government spend a fair amount of time comparing where their county is in relationship to other jurisdictions: it gives them something to crow about when things are going well and a way to make a case for increased funding when things aren't.

Finally, check with your state's chapter of the American Planning Association. In addition to national planning awards, state chapters also give awards to outstanding and innovative planning projects, including comprehensive plans. Typically, jurisdictions win because they have gone outside the box and have introduced

Side Notes: Warning Will Robinson...The Necessity of Groundtruthing

One of the downsides of the internet is that it is incredibly easy to find examples of documents that may actually not be a good fit for your needs. A number of years ago, when I was still fairly green in the planning profession, I wrote a proposal for a public input process to use in developing a park plan in the County. I had based in on a couple of approaches I had found from jurisdictions in Northern Virginia. I didn't take time to look at either the size of the jurisdictions I was borrowing from, nor their resources, nor their budgets. The plan I devised was beautiful and incorporated all sorts of bells and whistles; unfortunately, it would have cost nearly the department's entire budget and would have required more citizen volunteers that I could probably muster in a 10 year span. Great ideas, lousy fit.

A couple of months ago, I was reading a stack of rfps from different parts of the country in order to compare approaches. I stumbled across an RFP from a small town (Town A) in in a fairly remote area, an area accessible only by airplane. Town A had copied an RFP document from a small town (Town B) located in in an urban area, adjacent to a major north/south interstate, and halfway between two major universities located just off of the same north/south interstate.

The RFPs were identical, down to the list of expected products and approaches. The requirements for the comprehensive plan documents were fairly extensive, including the development of a “user's manual” for the plan and an intense approach to public participation. The original (Town B) was written in 2003 and the revised version (Town A) was written in 2010. Both towns included a specific budget: $70,000 for Town B, and $80,000 for Town A. Accounting for inflation, the amount specified by Town A was within range of the amount specified by Town B and would have been a fair estimate if all else had been equal. Unfortunately, for Town A, the closest consulting firm was a 400 mile flight rather than a 25 mile drive and the cost of hotel accommodations was well over $150.00 per night. Town B's close proximity to population centers and consulting firms meant that the town probably did not have to cover the cost of accommodations and the other travel expenditures were probably minimal (mileage plus an hour to two hours of travel time, round trip, at 50% of hourly rate). It is not clear that Town A considered the travel costs when they set their budget, but at a guess it is assumed that the didn't and the costs are not accounted for in the planning budget.

What Town A did was actually not that unusual. The local planner went online to find an example of an RFP document they could use locally and then tweaked the document. Every planner does this at some point, and it is a standing joke in a fair number of planning departments...”if you find something that works, steal it.” While using documents from other jurisdictions essentially falls under fair use (they are public documents rather than the next great novel), it is absolutely vital to ground-truth the document. Is the approach, the information, the requirements, and the budget a good fit or do they need major revisions. In the case of Town A, the planning process and the required documents might work well, but they radically underestimated the cost of the project.

Resources: Sources of Information:

Sample RFPs, by State.

Epodunk: the single best source of information and access links for nearly every village, town, city, and county in the United States. The site was started by a group of journalists in Ithaca NY. Start here.

Citi-Data: despite the name, they provide reasonably accurate data for towns, cities, and county nation-wide. The site was started by a social networking firm in Illinois and their data is fairly accurate.

US Census Bureau: the redesign is not as easy to use as the old design, but if you are patient, it will give you access to comparative census data. It won't give you the range of information available from citi-data.com, but it is "official" and reasonably accurate.

Indiana Stats. Diverse set of fairly accurate information, based on a broad range of government statistics. Good for county and MSA data, nationally. Not particularly useful for smaller communities.

innovative techniques and approaches. While you may not be able to use their exact technique, they may give you some ideas on how to approach the planning process in your own jurisdiction..

.. Look everywhere for Inspiration. Good ideas are worth looking for, regardless of their state of origin. The ideas may deal with large, long-term projects (acity-wide greenspace program or a comprehensive plan) or smaller tasks (the list of criteria and weights for an RFP). This is especially true for approaches to public information, public participation, policy development, plan structure, and document design.

Ground-Truthing. In map-making (GIS, cartography, et al.), one of the keys is ground-truthing, making sure that what is on map is actually on the ground. There is nothing worse than discovering the bridge you expected to find and that was listed on your Rand McNally, was the victim of budget cuts and results in a 50 mile detour.. The same need exists when borrowing from documents or using documents as a guide, without making sure that the facts in the borrowed document fit the facts on the ground in your jurisdiction.

A number of years ago, I was asked to research comprehensive planning costs for a member of the local Board of Supervisors. In particular, he wanted to know why our proposed costs, if we went the consultant route, cost more than another jurisdiction at the eastern end of the state. His assumptions presumed that the conditions, including the costs of planning, were the same and that the consultants were driving thirty minutes rather than four hours.

Requesting sample documents can make life easier, but if they are coming from a jurisdiction outside of your region, you will need to do some ground-truthing. Once you have the sample documents, read them, make notes on anything that seems unclear, and then contact the jurisdiction a second time. The second call is the most important. Most folks will readily identify what worked in the project, but may not as readily identify what did not. The second call is the "did not" call, and it is essentially an exercise in "ground-truthing." You need ask not only what did work, but also what did not. The easiest way of getting to the "did not" is to ask what they would change if they were to use the approach a second time or what problems they may have had as they moved from point A to point B.

Apples to Apples Comparisons. If your inquiry concerns costs (how much they spent on their comprehensive plan; how much they budgeted and paid for a consultant; did they have cost overruns or hidden costs), be sure that the figures you are getting are for comparable projects. If possible, ask for a line-item accounting of their costs rather than the end figure. You need to find out if their cost covers the same or similar tasks. For example, you may have six neighboring jurisdictions that have all completed their comprehensive plans in the past year. Two of the jurisdictions did "turn-key" plans, plans created primarily by a consulting firm. One had a comprehensive planner on staff and the remaining three used a partnership approach. Of the three using the partnership approach, one worked with a consultant, one with a local university, and the last with the local planning district commission. Because of the different approaches, their overall budget numbers will be radically different.

Scoping & Budgets

Constructing the scope and the budget for a comprehensive planning process requires an ongoing reality check, starting with an understanding of the required skill sets and the actual costs of creating a plan. Keep in mind that the scope and the budget should be developed at the same time, because each informs the other.

Resources:

Scoping Worksheet

Scoping is determined, in large part, by the approach you take to the plan. Scoping and budgeting are most commonly associated with the turn-key and partnership approaches. However, even if you are creating the plan in-house or hiring a fixed term contract planner, you should still take the time to create a working budget so you have an idea how much you are going to need in additional funds and a project scope to help determine when your staff is likely to need a few helping hands.

Always start the scoping process by constructing your “ideal” process, the process you would like to see without consideration of budget (see TCP 1:1 for information on planning a planning process). While your ideal process will probably lack detail (specific methods of public input, specific public outreach materials, and so forth), it will give you idea of what to shoot for. As with most processes, it is always better to start with too much material and pare down rather than approaching the process to narrowly. Developing the ideal planning process up front will also help you determine which approach to take.

The question of whether of not to use a consultant or how to use a consultant is part of the scoping process and the answers depend on a couple of factors: level of staffing and level of expertise. Start by taking a look at your current staffing level, keeping in mind that managing the planning process is a full-time job and should be treated as such. Assume that the process will require dedicating one full-time staff position and at least some hours from additional staff over the course of at least one year. You will also need to allow the lead staff planner to work on a flex rather than a fixed schedule during the course of the process. Most community meetings and workshops are held in the evenings and, especially, on weekends when citizens are available. The overtime can rack up. If you have a department with only one or two planners, you probably will need to go with one of the other approaches and avoid doing the plan strictly in-house with existing staff.

Even if you are initially planning on using a “turn-key” approach, make sure to create a list of tasks or parts of the process that could be done in-house if need be. This is important. As I note below, the bid prices may be above your price range and shifting from a “turn key “ to a partnership approach may be enough to bring the bid inline with your budget.

Resources:

Online Meeting Sites:

Join Me. By all accounts, one of the easiest screen sharing and meeting programs available and its free. Works with up to 250 users.

Go to Meeting. A bit more complicated than Join Me and comes with a price tag, but it will accommodate more participants.

Budgeting. The budget for the planning process is developed at the same time you develop your scope. Start by gathering detailed budgets from other jurisdictions and look at the price range for each step in the process. Perhaps the biggest advantage of starting with the information from other areas is that it removes “sticker shock” and gives you a way of evaluating whether to go with a “turn-key” approach or a partnership approach.

Assigning costs estimates to each of the steps in your ideal process, and then evaluate the total cost in relationship to the beginning budget figure. While you need to be realistic, do not use the final price tag on you budget to limit your reach.

In addition, make sure your preliminary budget accounts for hidden expenses (the costs of doing business). As a rule of thumb, you should hold back between 20% an 25% of the total budget to cover the costs of doing business. For example, if your elected officials budget $100,000 for the comprehensive plan, your budget for a consultant would be between $75,000 and $80,000. Typically, jurisdictions cover the cost of printing and photocopying, both of which can mount up over the course of the project's duration. The same is true for advertising, public outreach expenses, map production, and public meeting costs. The biggest hidden expense, however, for jurisdictions is redirected time (intangible costs). While you are already paying your staff for “x” amount of time, the time they spend working with the consultant or managing the process is going to take away the same amount of time from other projects.

RFPs asking for “turnkey” plans usually start with the consultant's design and recommendation for an ideal planning process based on the information you have provided in the RFP. The chances are that your costs and their costs are going to be higher than your budget. Make sure, in your RFP, that you specify that you want a detailed budget, which breaks down the costs for the individual parts of the process. Most consultants are willing to negotiate, so a bid higher than your established budget may not be what you will pay out in the end, especially if you and the consultant shift from a “turn-key” process to a partnership process. Most consulting firms are more than willing to make that shift.

In general, you can lower your overall costs by bringing some of the process back in-house. One of the best ways to lower consultant costs is to limit the number of visits, especially if the chosen consultant is traveling more than 100 miles and may need to stay overnight. Consultants charge travel expenses (mileage, room, per diem, and time) and those charges are not always included in the initial bid but are considered additional expenses. It is not a bad idea to include a “travel cost” requirement in your RFP and lock in the rate during negotiations. There are a number of online tools available that can also lower your overall costs, including online meeting sites like Join Me or Go To Meeting. Remember that the consultant/s with whom you are negotiating, want the job; otherwise, they wouldn't have submitted a proposal.

Including the Budgeted Amount in the RFP: There is no right or wrong in this. I've worked with jurisdictions that have withheld the budgeted amount and with others that include the budget in the RFP; and I've worked with consultants who had different reactions. As with most things in the RFP process, there are positives and negatives to both approaches. Leaving the actual budgeted amount out of the RFP document may encourage a greater number of proposals, especially from larger firms, but result in higher bids; putting it in will keep the bids in the budget range, but limit the range of approaches, ideas, and innovations.

Populating the Review/Selection Committee

There are a number of different ways you can formulate the review committee. For a great many jurisdictions, either staff or the planning commission and members of the planning staff function as the review committee for RFPs. It is not, however, a firm rule. Some jurisdictions, especially those that have decide to appoint a steering committee or a citizens advisory committee (CAC), may include members from the committee responsible for overseeing the process. As a general rule, however, you should also have a representative from the purchasing department, if one exists, or the finance department. Having someone on the committee who knows something about purchasing rules and contracts, at least in an advisory capacity, is a good idea and will save you some headaches during the selection process. As a rule of thumb, make sure your committee has a representative or group of representatives who will actually be working with the consultant or consulting agency.

A final note. There has been an increased emphasis on public participation over the past two decades and the movement towards increased participation mirrors the public push towards transparency. If you are in a jurisdiction that has had issues with transparency, adding citizens to the selection committee and establishing a steering committee, a CAC, or a citizen working group is a good way to get ahead of the curve, while sending a broader message to citizens.

The Evaluation Criteria

The evaluation criteria is simply the list of things the selection committee is looking for in a proposal and in an applicant. The selection committee should sit down and discuss the specifics included in the evaluation and come to some reasonable level of consensus about what they will be looking for in an applicant and in the proposal. To not do so invites trouble, especially if each member comes to the process with a different set of expectations and definitions.

As a general rule, most jurisdictions include: approach to the project, adequate staff, track record (both in terms of the quality of your documents and your ability to stay on track and on budget), overall reliability, cost, qualifications, references, and local knowledge (see Side Note on the next page for specific examples).

Approach to Work: Shorthand for "specifically, how are you going to approach this project." While the members of the selection committee do not need to be experts in planning, it is a good idea to look at examples of other plans or projects and, as a group, decide, in general terms, what they are looking for: whether it is a dynamic approach to the public participation processes, a focus on and understanding of neighborhoods, or innovative approaches to planning and economic development. They also need an idea of the technical approaches, including the type of plan (traditional, online, interactive).

Adequate Staff: Does the company actually have the staff or subcontractors to do the job they are being hired to do. It should be noted that for comprehensive plans in smaller jurisdictions, single consultants may well be more than adequate for the job. Do not discount sole proprietors; there are plenty of planning consultants who own single person firms who are more than capable of creating plans without a support staff.

Track Record: Simply, sample documents and references. Their previous work will show the range of projects the applicants have taken on in the past, the quality of their work (both in terms of innovative approaches and the technical merits). and their attention to locale-specific detail. With references, ask for at least three and preferably five. References are usually listed separately, but the questions that need to be asked, including ability to stay on task, hold to a budget, and so forth, are included under the track record criteria.

Overall Reliability: This criteria is based on the observations of others, most notably those listed under the references section of the request. Questions about overall reliability center on the applicants ability to meet deadlines, show up for appointments, stay on schedule, keep in contact, be factual and straight forward in providing information, and stay within the budget.

Cost: Self explanatory. With the current budget woes, cost has taken on a greater importance. However, jurisdictions should guard against allowing cost to become the main or majority selection criteria. There is no question that cost is important, but jurisdictions run the risk of ending up with an inferior product when cost is the only criteria that counts.

Qualifications: Resumes. Selection committees can find out a great deal about the applicants, staff, and subcontractors by looking at their resumes, including prior employment, projects, publications, organizational affiliation, and training.

References: Also self explanatory.

Approaches to Evaluation Criteria

Terrebonne Parish Consolidated Government Comprehensive Plan Update RFP, 2010 (With Weights)

Selection Criteria. The following criteria will be the basis on which consultants will be selected for further consideration (in no particular order). Scoring will be done on a 120 point scale.

- Technical approach to completion of work (30 points).
- Proposed design approach for the Plan Update and schedule for completion (20 points).
- Proposed project budget and rate structure for proposed staff including all subconsultants (10 points)
  - o Consultants will be awarded 10 points for including with proposal a certification that the project will not exceed the allotted budget.
  - o For each $1,000.00 over budget, 1 point will be subtracted from points total.
- Specialized or appropriate expertise in this type of Plan Update (15 points). This includes:
  - o Examples of the past performance of the lead consulting firm, subconsultants, and their employees on similar plans (5 points);
  - o Demonstrated adequate and experienced staff and proposed design team for the Plan Update (5 points); and
  - o Demonstrated experience in conducting public meetings and demonstrated above average public participation (5 points).
- Recent experience with successfully maintaining project schedules and budgets and current workload and firm capacity (10 points).
- Level of MWBE participation (5 points).
- Understanding of the area where the project is located (5 points).
- Demonstration of a project record free of significant technical problems and litigation resulting from errors or omissions (5 points).
- Oral Presentation by short-listed consultants (20 points).

Fairview Heights, Illinois: Comprehensive Plan RFP, 2010 (Without Weights)

The following criteria will be considered in evaluating the proposals and recommending up to three consultants to the Selection Committee.

· Capabilities and previous experience in comparable projects and specialized experience and technical competence of the consultant.

· The firm's general approach to the project. Although the City has identified a general nature of services required the consultant is given leeway toward the approach to the methodology to provide the requested services.

· Past Record of Performance: On contracts with other governmental agencies including such factors as quality of work, control of costs and the ability to meet schedules.

· Capacity of the Candidate: To perform the work in a timely manner affirmatively respond to the inquiries and schedule of the City and indicate the appropriate personnel as the schedule dictates.

· Qualifications of individuals who will have direct involvement in tasks on this project.

· Compatibility with the City's financial obligations.

City of Chico (CA): General Plan Update et al, 2007 (Without Weights)

The contract will be awarded only to a responsible consultant. In order to qualify as responsible, a prospective consultant must, in the opinion of City staff, meet the following standards as they relate to the RFP :

1. Have adequate staff, equipment, technical, and financial resources for performance, or have the ability to obtain such resources that are required for performance, including a demonstrated ability to meet work schedule time frames and deliverables
2. Have a satisfactory record of performance
3. Be an Equal Opportunity Employer

Local Knowledge: Local knowledge can be defined in two different ways: 1) the firm has experience in or near the jurisdiction, or 2) the firm demonstrates a knowledge of local conditions. That said, the local knowledge criteria is often shorthand for “local or regional firm.” To a great extent, the criteria makes sense, especially in areas where there are environmental, economic, or other planning challenges. For example, if your jurisdiction is heavily karst, the selection committee should look at whether the individual applicants have sufficient knowledge to deal with issues of planning for karst terrains. In addition, requiring “local knowledge” is one way of safeguarding against firms that are prone to using a cookie cutter approach to planning. On the downside, the “local knowledge” criteria has been used as a way to discourage the participation of firms, especially larger firms, from outside of the region and has been used to justify hiring a pre-chosen firm but were precluded from doing so because of competitive bid requirements.

To weight or not to weight. While most RFPs include a list of evaluation criteria, not all RFPs include a specific weighting system. There is an argument to be made for both approaches. By providing the consultant with weights (i.e. approach to the project 40 pts; qualifications, 20 pts; adequate staff 15 pts; examples of prior work, 15 pts; budget, 10 pts), you are signaling which elements are the most important and which are the least. A consultant, looking at the above numbers, is going to assume that the design and approach to the process is by far the most important element, while the cost, although important, is not necessarily the deciding factor. If one or two elements on your list are central to your decision, then providing the weighting information is more likely to produce proposals that match your needs. On the other hand, providing a list of criteria and no weights sends a message that all of the criteria essentially are equally weighted and equally important. An unweighted list is likely to produce proposals that have given equal consideration to all of the criteria and provide the selection committee with more latitude in choosing a consultant based on “better fit.” Finally, unweighted lists are also fairly common in RFPs that include the budget for the project.

Resources: Sample Tables of Content

Sample 1: TOC w/ numbered sections and subsections.

Sample 2: TOC w/ numbered sections and un-numbered subsections.

Sample 3: TOC “art” approach.

Sample 4: TOC w/ numbered sections and no subsections.

Being Nice to Consultants

Building an effective partnership with a consultant or consulting company starts when you create the RFP document. While none of the items in the following list are mandatory, and there are certainly plenty of examples of RFPs available online which leave them out, they will give your document a far more professional look and will help make the process easier for all concerned.

1. **Cover Sheets**: Add a cover sheet to your RFP. While cover sheets are not required, they serve two functions: 1) They tell the potential respondents that you are looking for a clean, professional response; and 2) they make your RFP harder to miss or to lose in a pile of papers. They say to the consultant, “look and respond to me.”
2. **Table of Contents**. All RFPs over five pages should include a Table of Contents. They make it easier for both consultants and for those serving on the selection committee to find information in the RFP without wasting time searching. There is nothing worse than having to spend an extended period of time searching through a large RFP document for a single provision.

3. **Description of Jurisdiction.** The description of the jurisdiction and the primary issues should be detailed enough to give the potential consultant a firm understand of both the place and the concerns. The description and discussion of issues does not need to be particularly long, but it should provide enough detail to give potential RFP responders where and how to focus their proposals.
4. **Provide a Clear Timeline for the RFP Process**. RFPs should include not only the date the responses are due, but should also include when a decision will be made. While, like other things in this list, the timeline is not mandatory, it is a courtesy and speaks well of the jurisdiction.

What to Look for in their Sample Documents

Cookie-Cutter Approaches: While it is not typical of planning consulting firms, there are firms that use cookie-cutter approaches to comprehensive plans and ordinance development. A few years ago, I served on a selection committee to review proposals for a new zoning ordinance for the jurisdiction. As I was looking at the examples from one of the applicants, I noticed that they had used identical stormwater provisions in all of their prior examples, despite the fact that one of the examples was from the eastern shore of Virginia, which is reasonably flat and sandy, and one from southwest Virginia which is characterized by steep slopes and way too much clay. Be on the lookout, especially in lean times, for applicants that take a "one size fits all" approach to planning. Plans need to reflect the local conditions, whether environmental, cultural, or economically. Cookie cutter plans, while often far cheaper, will not serve well the jurisdiction

Innovation: Innovative plans are plans that combine outside-of-the-box approaches with practical strategies or implementation steps. One way of gauging the level of innovation from different responders/applicants is to choose a single subject area (element), such as housing, economic development, land use, or the environment, and read sample chapters from each applicant. Look at how the different applicants address the same subject provides and apples-to-apples comparison.

Second, look at the level of detail included in the sample plans, including the glossaries. Comprehensive plans are essentially road maps for future change. It is easy to write a goal that states that a jurisdiction should shift from a traditional approach to a new approach. The key is whether the materials provide not only an explanation of the new approach and a rational explanation of need, but also provide adequate support materials (realistic objectives, strategies, and implementation steps) to actually get the jurisdiction from point A to point B.

Innovation is not just limited to the plan itself or the range of strategies the consultants have designed to address local issues. Innovation may also be found in the applicants' approaches to public information and public participation or in their final document designs. For example, consultants , increasingly, are using available internet technologies, including social media and wikis, to garner public input, distribute public information, and create interactive documents. Many of the approaches sound good and may work very well in more urbanized areas, but may not work at all in rural jurisdictions where there is limited or slow (dial-up) internet coverage.

Just as staying with the familiar (the "because we have always done it this way" approach) is not necessarily a sound approach to planning, nor is embracing new approach without asking "how do we make this work."

Attention to End User: Every writing project, every document, has an audience. In the case of public documents (comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances, and even staff reports), the answer to the question "who is this for" should be "the general public." In defining audience, it is often too easy to draw a line between the general public and elected and appointed officials, forgetting that they are, essentially, one and the same. Very few officials, elected or otherwise, have a planning background when they enter office.

Clearly define the public user (their level of understanding, range of knowledge, and so forth) fairly early in the planning process. This is especially important if you are working with consultants or outside agencies: define who is going to be using the document , include your expectations in the RFP, and look at how the consultants have dealt with the issue of the end-user in the examples they provide during the RFP process.

Attention to Regional Trends. For a great many rural jurisdictions, the pressure to change is external rather than internal. Counties that were once well removed from urban areas now find themselves as the new location for suburban growth. Look to see if the proposals include consideration of external pressures, whether from suburban expansion, from absentee owners, or from externalities (negative impacts on non-consenting parties) stemming from changes in neighboring jurisdictions. The issue of externalities is important, especially if neighboring jurisdiction iare causing rapid cross-border suburbanization, environmental damage, or economic impacts. If there are cross-border issues, look to see if the proposal provides approaches to address those issues (e.g. multi-jurisdictional studies or workshops).

Editor's Note. This series will be continued in the next issue of The Community Planner. Part 3 focuses public information and public education.