



What is a request for proposals?

When a community plans to provide a new service or product, it solicits what is known as a “request for proposals,” or RFP. The RFP outlines the services desired by the community and provides the necessary background for interested parties to submit a proposal for accomplishing the task(s).

Hiring a Planning Consultant: A Guide to Preparing a Request for Proposals

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What are the benefits of an RFP?

A request for proposals benefits a community by:

- Helping to select the best or most appropriate consultant for your community.
- Focusing on necessary tasks to meet statutory provisions and specific tasks desired by the community.
- Providing a rational and fair process for reviewing all submitted proposals, weighing the various options presented, including fees, products, meetings, schedules and completion dates.
- Explaining clearly to citizens, other local government units and local officials why the community is seeking to prepare a comprehensive plan, what it wants the plan to achieve and the basic process it intends to follow in preparing the plan.
- Providing the community with insights, observations and approaches to better understand community issues.
- Helping community members become wiser and better prepared to select a consultant and avoid unanticipated problems along the way.

What is a request for qualifications?

A request for qualifications, or RFQ, is a community’s request for a list of qualified consultants who have previously performed similar tasks in the past for other communities. Gaining knowledge of firms that have previously developed comprehensive plans for similar sized communities gives your community a foothold in the process of hiring a consultant. Background material from these firms should help your community to understand the consultants’ depth of expertise in comprehensive planning. The process of developing an RFQ and receiving consultants’ responses may bring new planning ideas to your community as you move forward in the RFP process.

Does the community need to prepare an RFP if it is going to work with the county or regional planning commission?

Preparing an RFP is critical even if the community is considering contracting with a regional planning commission or county planning department for the community’s comprehensive plan. Like a consulting firm, these public planning agencies should submit a formal response to the community’s RFP. This will benefit the community by better understanding the public agencies’ proposal for your plan, overall project timeline and anticipated products for the community.

Hiring a consultant

Figuring out when to hire a planning consultant can often be as difficult as deciding which consultant to hire. Preparing a comprehensive plan and then implementing its provisions takes time and effort by local governments. A concisely written “Request for Proposals” will make the hiring process easier.

Before hiring a consultant, a community should do a little homework regarding the professional assistance it is seeking. Some communities may not have previous experience in hiring outside help for developing a comprehensive plan. Communities may not know of other communities that have hired a planning consultant either. So, how do you start the search for a consultant that fits your needs? What should you look for?

The figure below shows an eight-step process. The remainder of this fact sheet will discuss each step.

Step 1: Plan for planning

In the process for preparing a comprehensive plan, an important step is the “plan for planning.” It is at this step that you need to think about hiring a planning consultant. After all, most of the remaining steps in the process are geared to preparing the comprehensive plan.

There are several areas where a local government needs to make decisions before starting on the process to hire a consultant.

Get a commitment from local leaders

A commitment from local leadership is critical for moving ahead with a comprehensive planning process.

Define the project

Defining your community’s project as a comprehensive plan is insufficient. If it wants to undertake a comprehensive planning process, the new comprehensive planning law provides local governments with the minimum requirements necessary for a comprehensive plan. Every local government should make sure that its comprehensive plan is tailored to its assets and needs. Therefore, the community needs to identify some current and future key issues.

Assess local capacity

A local government that is studying whether or not to hire a consultant needs to realistically assess local planning capacity. Where it is lacking or inadequate, building local capacity may become a part of the comprehensive planning process either through educational and training programs or through a commitment to hire professional staff.

A series of 11 questions should help you establish the need for a planning consultant:

1. What is the issue, problem or project that the planning agency must address?
2. What is the intended end product or result?

3. Does the agency have the necessary expertise in-house? What expertise is lacking?
4. Are there factors aside from the new planning law that are determining a completion date?
5. Would it be practical to hire permanent or temporary staff to do the comprehensive plan?
6. What is the estimated total cost of hiring additional staff compared to hiring a consultant?
7. Would the hiring of additional staff carry with it the possibility of a longer-term commitment than the current requirements justify?
8. Would the hiring of a consultant add objectivity, prestige or credibility to the result?
9. Is there political controversy connected with the project? If so, could the presence of a consultant help defuse it?
10. Does the project require a detached, objective or innovative approach?
11. Are there resources available from the county, financial assistance, in-kind services, etc.?

Answering this series of questions should lead the plan commission to one of three conclusions: 1) no additional assistance is necessary; 2) some additional staff needs to be hired; or 3) a consulting firm will be needed to do the work rather than doing it internally.

Eight steps to hiring a consultant.

Step 1 ➡ Plan for planning	Step 2 ➡ Identify a list of prospective consultants	Step 3 ➡ Organize for selection	Step 4 ➡ Establish a budget and prepare RFP	Step 5 ➡ Interview 2–3 firms and select one	Step 6 ➡ Negotiate a contract	Step 7 ➡ Manage the project	Step 8 Confirm contract compliance; close project phase
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Step 2: Identify a list of prospective consultants

After the above decisions and assessments are made, your community can send out a "Request for Qualifications" or RFQ as a way to limit the number of consultants to which they will send the "Request for Proposal."

Request for Qualifications

An RFQ is a community's request for a list of qualified consultants who have previously performed similar tasks in the past for other communities. The consultants and firms who may be interested will provide your community with materials in response to the RFQ. These materials may indicate their experience with other communities, successful projects, references and staff information including the number and type of staff as well as their professional background. This background material should help your community to understand the consultants' depth of expertise in comprehensive planning.



Step 3: Organize for selection

In this step, there are four essential tasks: 1) identifying a consultant selection team; 2) establishing a decision-making process; 3) selecting criteria for choosing a consulting firm; and 4) preparing a recruitment/publicity plan.

Identify a project selection team

The individuals chosen for the consultant selection team should: 1) be people who will work with consultants and depend on their work in the future; and 2) come from a variety of perspectives to ensure broad representation.

Establish a decision-making process

It is important that the planning committee and the project selection team establish a decision-making process for who participates in the selection process and more importantly, who makes the final selection. Will the project selection team make a recommendation to the plan commission? Will the final selection be made by the town board or village trustees? These are critical decisions in the overall process.

Select criteria for choosing a consulting firm

Your team will need to decide how to select the consultant. The RFP must discuss the community's evaluation process used to select a group of consultant proposals for interviews and the process for final selection of a consultant. This process should include how your community will examine proposals and the criteria for evaluation.

RFP submittals may be evaluated on the following, or additional criteria: 1) professional qualifications; 2) past experience; 3) proposed work plan; 4) how they address community needs; 5) innovation; 6) knowledge of applicable Wisconsin statutes.

Prepare a recruitment/publicity plan

Advertising the RFP is a critical step in reaching out to consultants. Getting the word out about your RFP can occur through various avenues: a press release for the local newspaper, an article for a community newsletter, a poster at the community center or the town hall, or a letter sent to specific consulting firms.

Step 4: Establish the budget and prepare RFP

Establishing the budget and defining the task can be the more difficult, time-consuming and contentious parts of this entire process. However, with an adequate decision-making process and an agreed upon “plan for planning” in place, these two parts should run smoothly.

Establish the budget

In your “plan for planning,” your community should have prepared a budget for the comprehensive planning process. A general rule of thumb is: The more you spend, the better the plan will be. Of course, there are caveats to any rule, this one included. The difference between a \$25,000 plan and a \$250,000 plan is the level of detail, the use of technical models, including geographic information systems and the level of public participation.

In the RFP, you should specify how much you are willing to pay. By making your budget known, consulting firms can specify what they can do for that amount of money. If you do not specify an amount, consulting firms will be reluctant to spend the time to prepare a response and/or you will receive proposals with a wide range of costs and services. Wildly different proposals are difficult to compare and evaluate.

Prepare the RFP

A “Request for Proposals” or RFP is an advertisement by a community that seeks proposals for conducting a certain service or for providing a product. The RFP outlines the services that a community wants accomplished and provides necessary background for consultants.

Establish an open process

It is important that an RFP process is completely open, and there is no bias in favor of a particular firm going into the selection process. A community must maintain a professional relationship between itself and any future consultants. To minimize favoritism, the RFP should clearly describe the process used to select a consultant, including who will make the selection, the criteria for making the selection, and the time-line for making a decision.

Develop the RFP

Developing a Request for Proposals should focus on your community and its project, specific project needs and requirements, and the outcomes and expectations for the consultant. It should outline what the community can contribute in terms of time, facilities, data and other pertinent information to help consultants gear their proposal to best suit your community.

Length —Usually between 10 and 25 pages, but can be as short as 6 to 10 pages, not including additional attachments such as maps, drawings and supporting documents.

Content—The general content of an RFP should include the following: 1) title page; 2) introduction to your community’s project; 3) brief overview of your community’s history including its governance; 4) scope of services; 5) community contact information; 6) any specific labeling requirements for the submission package; 7) beginning and deadline dates for proposal submissions by consultants; 8) equal opportunity clause; 9) non-collusion affidavit; 10) a liability clause; and 11) attachments such as maps, drawings, and lists of on-going projects and studies in your community.

Deliverables—Deliverables are the items your community would like to retain or receive as a result of the preparation of the comprehensive plan. Some examples of common deliverables include: Public participation materials, such as survey results, brochures or posters, data gathered during the plan process; copies of the draft and final adopted plan, both in hard (paper) copy and electronic formats.

Other requirements—Your community should consider asking consultants how they would achieve your desired scope of services by including the following sections: Project Understanding, Overall Project Approach, Proposed Approach to Public Participation, Description of Special Experience, Project Timeline.

When your RFP is prepared, you need to send it to the list of prospective consultants identified in Step 2 as well as using your recruitment/publicity plan to get the word out.

What should the scope of services include?

A basic list of services follows.

- Data collection and analysis
- Facilitation of a visioning exercise and issues identification
- Facilitation of goals and objectives based on vision and issues
- Development and implementation of a public participation procedures/plan
- Coordination and outreach efforts with other state, regional and local governments and agencies in developing the comprehensive plan.
- Preparation of comprehensive plan document that includes nine elements are required under the comprehensive planning law.
- Print and distribute the Comprehensive Plan document
- Review of plans at the local, state, county and regional planning commission level affecting the study area.
- Review of existing zoning and other types of ordinances and recommended changes to make them consistent with the provisions of the new Comprehensive Plan.
- Recommendations regarding adoption by your community of any land use control ordinances. Developing such an ordinance may or may not be a part of this contract.
- Attendance at meetings with staff and public.
- Development of a plan adoption ordinance per s. 66.1001(4), Stats.

What should be included in the RFP?

An RFP should include the following:

- A title page with the name of the project and your community's contact information.
- An introduction to the community's project
- A brief overview of the community's history
- Scope of services
- Other studies, plans, inventories completed and/or adopted
- Any specific labeling requirements for the submission package
- The beginning and deadline dates for proposal submissions by consultants
- The types of deliverables your community is expecting the consultant to produce
- The community's evaluation process for selecting a consultant
- Equal opportunity clause
- Non-collusion affidavit
- A statement of liability (the community shall not be liable).
- Attachments such as maps, drawings and lists of ongoing projects and studies

Step 5: Interview two–three firms and select one

At this point your community has decided to hire a planning consultant and has defined the scope of service. Now your team should consider interviewing a short list of consultants.

Check short list of references

From the review of applications, establish a list of qualified consultants and invite them to interview with your community and/or its selection committee. The criteria for establishing this interview list should include pertinent experience of the potential consultant and its staff, together with any feedback that may be requested from references cited by the potential consultant.

Prior to the interview you should request and contact the consultants' references. Two or three references should be sufficient. In the sidebar are some possible questions to ask of these references.



Questions for references

- Did those communities have problems similar to those of your community?
- If so, what approach was taken? What were the results?
- Was the community satisfied with the consultant's work?
- Was the consultant successful in engaging the public in the comprehensive planning process?
- Was the project completed in the specified time frame? Did the project costs overrun the preliminary budget?

Questions when examining samples of work

- Are the final reports precise and understandable?
- Do they provide material that is both interesting and useful to the community?
- Does the material provide a continuing guide for a community as it carries out a plan?

Source: *Choosing a Consultant for Local Planning*. c.1998.
www.mnplan.state.mn.us

It is important to conduct a thorough interview. Conduct each interview separately. Each firm should understand the proposed work and your selection procedures; that is, how you will make a decision. At the interview, the firm should demonstrate how it would: present the plans and policies of the governing body and plan commission to the public; establish and convey mutual professional trust in dealing with other agencies and the public; involve citizens in the planning process, and perform the necessary work within a reasonable time (Minnesota Planning).

Some interview questions to use include: What is the consultant's current workload? How would this project fit in to their current workload? Who would work on the project? What are the credentials of the project manager and other key participants? Would subcontractors be used? What are their credentials?

Recall step 3 which established the decision-making process as to how the final selection would be made.

Step 6: Negotiate the contract

After you have selected a consultant, you need to negotiate the contract and review and modify the work schedule. The contract should include the cost, method of invoicing, scheduling, definition of work products (refer to your RFP), and commitment of personnel.

An important part of this process is reviewing the scope of services with the consultant. This is the time to negotiate the details of that scope of services. For example, the consultant might suggest three open houses, but the selection committee wants four. If you hire a consultant without negotiating the scope of services, you may be disappointed in the outcomes, the project could go over budget if the scope of services changes, and the consultant can get frustrated if there is any ambiguity in the RFP. Like any job that you hire out, the contract needs to provide enough detail so that all parties understand project expectations and outcomes. In addition, a contract needs to spell out all the responsibilities of the consultant.

Part of a good contract is to clarify what happens when the project goes over budget. As much as no one wants a project to go over budget, it makes good sense to include this aspect in a contract. A planning process can go over budget for many reasons, including increasing the scope of services, changing the consultant's responsibilities, holding more meetings than originally anticipated, staff changes within the local government and the consulting firm, experience level, time needed to review drafts, and citizen involvement and education.

There are two general types of payment methods you can enter into with a consultant: fixed price or time and expense. Include one of these payment methods in the contract. For many RFPs the payment terms are specified as fixed price or not to exceed amount. Either in the RFP or in the interview it is useful to make the consulting firm aware of how you will pay them. Often when particular milestones are reached a lump sum payment can be made. This offers another method to keep the project on track and continue to receive background reports or other aspects of the plan.

At this stage you also should develop a work schedule that is as detailed as possible. When the consultant is given the signal to move ahead, the project manager at the local government needs to be able to keep track of tasks and keep the consultant on track. Realize that the work schedule, especially if prepared with tight time lines, will inevitably go off-track. Be as realistic as possible with the consultant about the tasks identified throughout the comprehensive plan process.

Step 7: Manage the project

Project management is essential to hiring a consultant. Like other staff of a local government, project management and oversight are critical. A project manager (in a town it might be the town clerk) is necessary to do the following: 1) act as the primary contact point (the consultant needs to know who to contact if questions come up or who can assist in contacting other individuals in your community); 2) manage the flow of information on the project between consultant and other staff and between consultant and the public/stakeholders; 3) supervise work done by in-house staff; 4) monitor tasks detailed in the work schedule; 5) maintain the meeting schedule with the consultant; 6) give the consultant room for innovation, creativity and objectivity; 7) provide agency policy for internal review (the plan commission).

The project manager can be the head of a department, a standing committee of local government or an ad hoc committee working through a standing committee.

Step 8: Confirm contract compliance and close project phase

As the process moves forward, the project manager and the plan commission (and/or local comprehensive planning committee) needs to evaluate the consultant's work. The consultant needs to know if their work complies with the contract or if revisions are necessary. Good communication with the consultant and continuous evaluation is essential throughout this process.

Closing out the project means that your community is satisfied with the consultant's work and the local government has reviewed all bills and has processed all payments to the consultant.

Who can help

There are many organizations and resources available to assist a local government to prepare a Request for Proposal.

The local community

Citizens are experts on the issues and broader trends affecting their communities. Elected and appointed officials provide leadership for a fair, open planning process, and one that recognizes public and private interests, and that balances community development needs with conservation needs. Local comprehensive plan committees play a variety of important roles including sponsoring the planning process.

Government agencies

Government agencies may have a local service mandate or motive; however, their expertise may be limited to one specific field. Consider **federal government agencies**, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service. Also consider **state government agencies**, such as the Department of Natural Resources and Transportation or Commerce. Agencies such as Regional Planning Commissions may be a resource. Finally **county level agencies** can be helpful.



Colleges and universities

The University of Wisconsin System has 25 two- and four-year colleges and universities scattered throughout the state. Part of the mission for all these campuses is to provide local services within their community.

University of Wisconsin–Extension, Cooperative Extension county-based faculty

Cooperative Extension faculty working at the county level seek to improve the quality of local decisions by providing public, private and non-profit clients with information, targeted research results and process support. County faculty members are supported by campus-based specialists with a diverse range of skills, knowledge and research capacities.

Consulting firms

Consulting firms offer a wide range of services to municipalities and counties, many of which are strongly connected with the content of comprehensive plans and plan implementation. However, public and private planning service providers sometimes are guilty of offering “sample” RFPs that tend to reinforce their own strengths as a provider.

Other organizations

The American Planning Association has a web site that is full of information to download or purchase. The *Plan Commissioner's Journal*, also on the web, has many useful articles and information on planning, as does the web site of 1000 Friends of Wisconsin. This site has information related to smart growth.

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