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“So You Want to Build a Fire or EMS Station?”
Part Two: Selecting an Architect

Written by: Kenneth C. Newell, AIA NCARB

The days of new construction or major renovations to public safety stations without the assistance of an Architect are quickly coming to a close in even the most remote regions. Not only does the law require that a person adequately trained in the health, safety and welfare of building occupants design facilities but departments realize that capital funds are so difficult to come by that the design must be right the first time.

Architecture firms come in a variety of sizes and types. There can be pros and cons to large firms and small firms. This article will pose a series of common questions and answers regarding the selection of an Architect. Much of the information discussed can also be found in an AIA document entitled “You and Your Architect”, available through the American Institute of Architects.

When should we bring the Architect into the project?

Include the Architect as early as possible! Last issue we discussed how the architect should be able to assist you with many preliminary steps, often before they start charging fees. Many Owners go through the property selection process before involving the Architect. However, the Architect can provide critical information that can help determine the appropriateness of considered sites. They can also help to insure that you do not acquire too little or too much property. The Architect can perform site studies, help secure planning and zoning approvals, and perform a variety of other pre-design tasks.

How do we find suitable firms to contact?

Consider the Architects that support your Associations. They have already made an investment in you by providing financing and resources. Contact your local American Institute of Architects (AIA) chapter. They will have information about regional firms and their web pages may even link to firms with public safety experience. Ask other departments or municipalities who designed projects that you have admired or that seem especially appropriate. For building types as specialized as public safety facilities, you may not want to limit your choices to only “local” Architects. Local politics often drive who is chosen for projects. This likely will not serve you well if the local firm does not have extensive public safety experience.

What information should we request of potential Architects?

At a minimum, ask prospective firms to show you their projects that are similar to yours. Ask them to indicate how they will approach your project and who will be working on it, including consultants hired by the Architect. Ask for short or long resumes of the firm's "team" for your project. It is probably wise to consider only firms that have enough Architects that, should something happen to the project Architect, they have other qualified Architects that could complete the project.

Ask for project data for similar projects that the firm has designed. Make sure the firm has more than just a few public safety projects similar to yours that were completed successfully. Ask specifically if the Architect is involved in any litigation with owners on current or past projects, at least a ten-year history. If the answer is yes, find out details. Ask for the names of other clients you may contact and talk with those owners to whom the firm has provided professional services for similar projects.

Why are "face to face" interviews with a potential Architects desirable?

I'm guessing not many of you married your spouse without seeing them first! Now I'm not suggesting that you are going to marry your Architect, but you are likely going to be dealing with them a lot over an extended period of time. No matter how good someone may look "on paper" there are a lot of issues that need to be addressed in person. During the course of the project it will likely be necessary for the Architect to make presentations to several groups that you answer to. You need to make sure that the Architect has that ability. An interview addresses one issue that cannot be covered in brochures: the chemistry between the owner and designer. Without that chemistry it may be a long project for all!

How many firms should we interview, and how should they be selected?

Interview between one and five firms. If you have great information, references and a preliminary meeting with a public safety architect that meets all of your requirements you may feel comfortable in selecting that designer if code or law allows. Don't interview so many that the process becomes "a blur" and wears out the selection committee. Make sure the selection committee includes the major end users of the facility. Interview firms that you feel can do your project because of their expertise and experience. Don't give "courtesy" interviews. Insist on meeting the Architect's key people who will work on your project.

During the interviews, what are some of the questions we should ask?

How much information will the Architect need from you to provide the necessary services? Who in the firm will work directly with the client? How does the firm provide quality control during design? What is the firm's construction-cost experience? What is the firm's history of performing projects on schedule? Usually, the two driving factors for most projects are time and money. It is imperative to determine that the firm has a

good track record of bringing the project in on-time and on-budget. Who from the firm will be performing construction administration during the construction phase? How busy is the firm? Do they have the time necessary for your project now or when you need it?

Should we make “pre-design” a condition of selection?

Some owners request that all the potential Architects present a schematic design of the new facility during the interview. This is not recommended for several reasons. It is usually unreasonable to request the Architect to spend the huge amount of time necessary to develop a “legitimate” design without the ability to be compensated. This can lead to firms hurriedly presenting “eye-wash” schemes that have very little thought and almost no serious programming behind them. Therefore, a firm that can present a “pretty picture” may be selected over one that will ultimately design the better facility.

After the interviews, how should we follow up?

If you haven’t spoken with the Architect’s past clients, do so now. Assess both the previous performance of the firm and the performance of the resulting facilities. If you have not visited some of the firm’s previous facilities similar to yours, now would be a good time to do so.

On what should we base our selection decision?

Personal confidence in the Architect is paramount. If you don’t trust them, don’t hire them. The Owner/Architect relationship demands accountability. Seek a balance among design ability, technical competence, cost, and professional service. Once you’ve selected the Architect enter into detailed negotiations of services and compensation. If you cannot agree, initiate negotiations with your second choice firm.

What about competitive bidding among Architects?

Some organizations, boards or municipalities require that designer selection be based on qualifications and not fees. For those that don’t, you can ask for a fee proposal at any point that you think is appropriate. If you are considering soliciting fee proposals from more than one firm, you will want to make sure that you can provide enough information for definite proposals. Each firm must be able to prepare proposals based on the same scope of services so that you can make an “apples to apples” comparison.

Bottom line

Experience, expertise, and good references in public safety design should be the bare minimum required in a potential Architect for your facility. An Architect is trained to listen to you –the client- and to translate your ideas into a viable construction project. Look for an Architect who is a good listener and you’ll usually find a good Architect. Next issue we will discuss what you should expect from your Architect once you have selected them.