SELECTING A CONSULTANT
IN THE RESOURCE RECOVERY FIELD

HENRY V. TEASE
Combustion Engineering, Inc.
Windsor, Connecticut

Discussion by

Junius W. Stephenson
Havens and Emerson, Inc.
Saddle Brook, New Jersey

This discussion relates primarily to selection of a design consultant although it is felt the principles apply equally to selection of a full-service organization to design, build and operate a resource recovery facility. The term “consultant” should be read in that context in this discussion. Most of the comments also apply to selection of a construction manager or individual consultants for other phases of a resource recovery project.

The increasing interest in resource recovery in this country in the past decade has spawned a vast number of “instant experts” in the solid waste field who on occasion have seemed to pop up from behind almost every garbage can on the block. The result has been a series of projects which have ranged from varying degrees of success to near complete failure and withdrawal of the associated “instant experts” from the solid waste field.

Those experienced in solid waste management recognize the unique problems in the handling, processing, storing and burning of this heterogeneous material and attempt to allow for them in the planning of resource recovery facilities. Despite this foresight, extended shakedown or debugging periods can be anticipated in even the best planned resource recovery system.

The worst problems and failures have occurred in the instances where the unique characteristics of solid wastes have not been recognized, the advice of professionals experienced in the field has not been sought, and, in some instances where that advice was offered, it was rejected. Numerous attempts to blindly adapt successful technologies from other fields have ended in serious, costly problems or near disaster due to failure to allow for solid waste’s special requirements.

The procedures and criteria described in this paper, if carefully followed, should assure selection of a properly qualified consultant for a resource recovery project as long as “background and experience” are given sufficient weight in the evaluation and are thoroughly investigated. The author has done a fine job in adapting accepted consultant selection procedures to a very specialized field. This reviewer generally agrees with his procedures and criteria with one exception; inclusion of the consultant’s fee or price among the evaluation criteria. In general, the consultant’s fee will be a relatively small part of the total cost of a resource recovery project. The difference in fees between two or three qualified consultants for similar services will be negligible in the overall financial picture. Accordingly, it is this reviewer’s opinion that inclusion of the fee as one of the evaluation criteria, no matter how small its weighting, may give inordinate influence to a relatively very minor consideration. It is far preferable to determine the best qualified consultant on the basis of other criteria, then negotiate a fee. If these initial negotiations cannot be concluded satisfactorily with the selected consul-
tant, they can then proceed with the second or third consultant.

Another problem in inclusion of the fee in the selection criteria lies in the fact that it must be assumed that all proposals are based on the consultant furnishing exactly the same services. In a field as complex as solid waste management and resource recovery, this may often be an unwarranted assumption. It is usually preferable to discuss the scope of services and the work to be performed with the selected consultant, then enter into fee negotiations when there is full agreement upon the scope and the work.

Careful consideration should be given to the number of consultants to be invited to submit proposals. Most consultants are prepared to submit general qualifications for different types of project at modest expenditure of time and money, but a detailed proposal for a resource recovery project can be very costly; $25,000 or more may be spent in the preparation of a proposal for a major project of this type. Obviously, therefore, it is unfair to request detailed proposals from an unduly large number of consultants. If a well-prepared request for qualifications is widely disseminated, responses should be received from many qualified consultants. A review of these qualifications submissions should then permit preparation of a short list of consultants to be invited to submit detailed proposals. For most projects it should not be necessary to include more than three consultants on the short list.

The author is to be commended for this presentation of an orderly means of improving the odds for success in a field that is still in its relative infancy.

**AUTHOR’S REPLY**

In his discussion, Mr. Stephenson suggests that a prospective consultant’s fee be eliminated from consideration as one of the evaluation criteria in selecting a consultant. I agree that the fee, in some cases, may be insignificant in relation to the total scope of a project; however, I do not believe that a consultant’s fee can be neglected during the selection process. Most municipal officials or project managers faced with operation within established budgets would find it difficult to justify the selection of a consultant if the cost of the services were not considered during the selection process.

There may be cases where the cost of consulting services are very important to the decision to proceed with a project. For example, if the objective of a project were simply to obtain information and a consultant’s report was the end product of the project, then certainly the consultant’s fee is significant in the decision to proceed with the project. In another case, if a municipality were approaching a resource recovery project in several phases with each phase funded through different sources, the cost of consulting services in any one phase could be an important consideration.

As suggested in the paper, proper selection of the weighing factor to be assigned to each of the selection criteria is a key to the success of a consultant selection process. By weighing the fee appropriately, its importance or insignificance to the overall project can be recognized.

The discussor also suggests that background and experience is one of the more important criteria in selecting a consultant. In the question and answer period following presentation of the paper, an interesting suggestion was made regarding background and experience of consultants selected for a project with a broad definition of scope or responsibilities encompassing many disciplines. It was suggested that some projects may require a team of consultants to be formed in order to respond appropriately to the needs and objectives of the project. Certainly there will be projects that can most effectively be carried out by such a team approach and in these cases the background and experience of each member of the consulting team can be applied most effectively to its area of expertise.

The comments of Mr. Stephenson and others in the audience that participated in the discussion of this paper are very much appreciated.