

Selection of an Architect

There is no state requirement that a competitive selection process be used to hire an architect in New Hampshire. Some municipalities may have policies or ordinances with specific requirements for the process. When hiring design professionals, it is usually not appropriate to base the selection on the designer's fee. The cost of design will ultimately be a small percentage of the total cost. Designers offer different skills and different approaches that are not well compared by looking at cost alone. Designers should be chosen for their level of skill, past experience, and the manner in which they approach the project. Many districts have established confidence in a particular individual or firm through past experience and prefer to use someone with whom they are comfortable. There are many advantages to this approach. Perhaps the most important aspect of a construction project is the level of trust that exists among the owner, designers, and builders. A good relationship based on positive past experience is a powerful tool that can lead to a successful project.

There are times however, when a district does not have an existing relationship with an architect, or simply wants to ensure that the project is given to the best qualified design team. If that is the case, the owner should be guided by one primary consideration: the qualifications of the team for the specific project to be undertaken. The recommended method for hiring an architect is a process known as Qualifications Based Selection (QBS). QBS is straightforward, objective, and fair. It will stand up to public scrutiny.

The QBS process usually involves the following steps, as provided by the NH QBS Coalition:

1. The owner prepares the preliminary scope of services, describing the project to be built or problem to be solved and formulates a schedule of activities.
2. The owner places legal notices of invitation in newspapers or other media and invites qualified firms to submit letters of qualifications in a format provided by the owner. The owner may wish to limit invitations to a selected group of firms that have been pre-qualified based on past experience or other criteria.
3. The owner reviews letters of qualifications, checks references, ranks firms and selects 3 to 5 firms for interviews. It is important that the selection be based on the qualifications of the entire design team, not just those of the lead architect or firm. Pre-interview site visits are arranged with the firms to be interviewed to provide the opportunity for a better understanding of the project requirements.
4. Interviews are conducted. During this process, it is important that the same questions be asked of each firm. In fact, it is suggested that qualification criteria and interview format material be made available to each firm prior to being interviewed. The owner should require that the interview be attended by the individuals who will actually be assigned to work on the project, not just the principals of the firm, or their marketing representatives. Whenever possible, the committee should visit schools designed by the candidates. Visual inspection, and discussion with those using the facility, will provide valuable background information for reaching a decision.
5. Following the interviews, the owner ranks each firm in accordance with a predetermined ranking system. All interviewed firms are notified of the results.
6. The highest-ranking firm is asked to participate in the preparation of a detailed scope of services and to negotiate conditions of the contract, including a fair and equitable fee.
7. If a satisfactory agreement cannot be reached, negotiations with that firm are suspended and negotiations are commenced with the second-highest ranking firm. The process continues until an agreement is reached and a formal contract is executed.

More information on QBS, including model letters and forms, is available at www.nhqbs.org.

Professional Ethics

The architect's code of ethics is contained in the "Standards of Professional Practice: issued by the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Too long to be included here, its essential features are as follows:

1. The profession of architecture calls for individuals of integrity, with business aptitude, communications skills, and artistic and technical ability. The architect's responsibilities cannot be discharged properly unless his motives, professional conduct, and ability command respect and confidence.

2. The architect receives remuneration for his professional service only and should not place himself in a position to receive commissions or allowances from any other source.
3. An architect may propose the services he is able to perform, but shall not, except under unusual circumstances, offer his services without compensation, and shall not submit free sketches.
4. An architect shall not enter into competitive bidding against another architect on the basis of compensation. He shall not use donation or misleading information on cost as a device for obtaining an advantage.

Architectural Fees

There is no schedule of minimum fees. An architect offers services at an agreed fee negotiated between himself and client. For construction projects, the fee is most often established as a percentage of the total project cost. Fees may also be based upon an hourly rate.

Contract Between Owner and Architect

Any undertaking involving expenditure of public funds should be conducted to avoid misunderstandings, disagreements, and possible legal actions. A written contract with the architect accomplishes this objective. The AIA's Standard Forms of Agreement are the most frequently used; copies may be secured from any architect. Building committees and school boards should review these documents carefully with legal counsel before entering into a written contractual agreement. Local modifications of the standard form contracts are common.

Construction Delivery Methods

There are several different types of construction contracts and delivery methods which are addressed in Chapter 13. The role of the architect varies among the different delivery methods. In fact, in a project being done under a design-build contract, the architect may not even work directly for the school district.

Changing Architects During the Project

Some school districts hire one architectural firm for the planning and programming phases of a project and then another firm for the design phase. This is usually not a wise practice. It is appropriate to establish separate contracts for each phase of the work to allow flexibility in how and when to proceed, but unless there is a problem, it is usually best to retain one architect for the entire project. School boards sometimes think that changing architects is a fiscally wise move to ensure that the architect does not drive the process in a direction that will provide him or her with the greatest profit. Only an unscrupulous businessman would do such a thing and the selection process should eliminate any such bad apples. As stated earlier, it is important to become comfortable with your architect. During the initial phases of the planning process the architect will learn what is important to the district and how you operate. That knowledge will help him or her translate the program into a building design that will meet your goals and needs. It makes no sense to discard an architect who has developed that relationship in favor of one who is completely unfamiliar with your program and goals.

Services of Professional Engineers and Consultants

Professional engineers, by statute, must also be registered in New Hampshire, and final construction drawings that are a product of their work, must bear their stamp. Listed below are some of the responsibilities of the professional engineers and other consultants who may be involved:

1. Surveyors – Identify boundaries, topography, wetlands, existing structures, and other site features. May be hired directly by the school district.
2. Geotechnical Consultants – Identify soil types and nature, explore subsurface site conditions, prepare reports for use by the architect and engineers.
3. Environmental Consultants – Examine the site to identify environmental concerns such as wetlands, historical significance, hazardous materials. Prepare maps and reports for use by the architect and engineers.
4. Civil Engineers – Site plans: grading, layout and design of roads, parking, play fields, storm drainage, water and sewer services, landscaping; obtain site permits
5. Electrical Engineers – Power, lighting, clock, program, fire detection and alarm systems, telecommunications and data systems, as well as security systems.
7. Mechanical Engineers – Heating, ventilation and air-conditioning, plumbing, and sprinkler systems.
8. Structural Engineers – Steel, concrete, masonry framing.
9. Kitchen Consultants – Design of food service operational spaces.
10. Others – As required.

Most engineers in the state are independent and are engaged by architects when needed in a building program. Other consultants may be engaged by the school district at the suggestion of the architect. Larger architectural firms often maintain their own engineering departments.

Districts should pay attention to the location of the engineering offices, especially for small projects. Modern communications systems allow design teams to work from widely spread locations, but there will be times when face-to-face meetings are necessary. On small projects, the payments to the engineers may be relatively low which may result in an unwillingness to travel a great distance for meetings or to inspect the work on site more than a few times. There needs to be an expectation from the district and a commitment from the designers that they will travel to meetings and site visits as often as necessary.