

Selecting a Healthcare Architecture Firm

Guidelines and Criteria

by Joseph G. Sprague, FAIA, FACHA, FHFI & George J. Mann, AIA

Selecting an architectural/engineering firm is a critical and momentous decision in the development of a new healthcare project. The current boom in health and hospital facility design and construction is unprecedented. Many firms have more work than they can handle. Therefore, a careful strategy and process needs to be developed to entice the best A/E firms to submit credentials and proposals for an upcoming Request for Qualifications/Request for Proposal.

Selection Process of an A/E firm

The following are suggested guidelines for selecting an A/E firm.

Gearing up: Announcing a new project and preparing for the architecture/engineering process is a critical first step.

Client team: The selection and composition of the client team that will initiate the coordination of the project is as important as the selection of the A/E firm. How will the client liaison team be organized? Who will be the contact point? Will that person be full time on the project? What are the credentials and experience of that person? What authority and respon-

sibility will that person have to make decisions? Will the client team prepare the staffing and space program?

Preparation and wording of RFQ/RFP: The client team should prepare and carefully word the RFQ/RFP. It should be brief, concise, and give specific due dates and information required.

Distribution of RFQ/RFP: The RFQ/RFP should be distributed to a specifically screened and pre-selected list of architectural firms. An important comprehensive list of these firms is the *Directory of Planning, Design, Construction Professionals for Health Facilities*, published

by American Hospital Association. The RFQ/RFP should specify what response is expected and give a deadline for receipt of a response.

Development of short list:

After the deadline for responses to the RFQ/RFP, a short list of firms should be developed based on the responding firms' answers and be invited for interviews.

Questions to Ask Architectural Firms Prior to Interviews

A questionnaire should be generated that includes a request for written responses to the following questions.

- **Volume:** What is the firm's five-, 10-, 15-year record of dollar volume of construction?
- **Design awards:** Has the firm won design awards in recent years? From what organizations and for what?
- **Servicing the project:** How will the project be serviced? Who will be the primary contact point? Is he a principal? What is the location of the person's office in relation to your hospital or health facility?



When selecting an architectural firm, healthcare providers must ask who will staff the project, as well as whether the team has worked together.

- **The project team:** How will the project team be staffed and organized? Who will lead the team? Will each member of the team come for the interview? Have they worked together before? In what other projects are they involved? For how long?
- **Staffing the project:** Who will staff the project? Even within outstanding firms, the experience level and talents of the staff varies.

- **Continuity of the staff:** How long has the staff that is to direct, coordinate and work on your project been with the firm? What are the staff members' credentials?
- **Litigation:** In what litigation has the firm been involved? How has the litigation been settled? Is there pending litigation? What is the nature of that litigation?
- **The leaders:** What are the

credentials of the principals? FAIA, AIA, FACHA, ACHA, FHFI, NCARB, RA? Are the principals in the firm active in architecture for health-related organizations—AIA/Academy of Architecture for Health (AAH), ACHA, ASHE, UIA/PHG?

- **Interdisciplinary philosophy:** Is there a culture of embracing and opening the design process to other disciplines? Are there nurses and physicians who are part of the interdisciplinary team?
- **Consultants:** Who will be the consultants to the architects? Will they include sustainability, structural, electrical, mechanical, industrial, interior designers, food services, graphics, central sterile supply, clinical, nursing and imaging professionals?
- **Planners:** Does the firm use planners either on staff or as consultants to analyze large regional issues such as access and transportation, zoning, utilities, setbacks and contextual issues?
- **Coordination:** Coordination and integration of consultants and related disciplines: How will coordination and integration be achieved?
- **Proven record:** Does the firm have a proven and documented track record in healthcare architecture?
- **Experience in sub-building type:** Does the A/E firm have a documented record of experience in subspecialty architecture for health projects, heart centers, cancer centers, women and children's hospitals and/or psychiatric facilities?
- **Awareness of trends:** Are the

A visit to the architectural office will help familiarize potential clients with the firm's culture and processes.



principals and staff aware of new trends in health facility design, and trends in causes of illness and death? How do they remain current?

- **Project schedule:** Request that a proposed project schedule be generated. Next, determine whether it is realistic.
- **Sensitivity to cost:** How does the A/E firm monitor construction costs during the design process? Project costs? Life-cycle costs?
- **Research group:** Does the firm have a research division? On what research is it focusing? Who heads the group? What are their credentials and do they have a Ph.D. or M.D.? Are they involved in patient safety?
- **Evidence-based design:** Does the firm use the evidence in research findings and conclusions upon which to base its designs?
- **Patient safety:** How and specifically in what way will the firm address issues of patient safety in its design?
- **Sustainability:** Does and has the firm designed for sustainability? Is the staff assigned to your project LEED-certified?
- **More questions:** What questions does the A/E firm have about the project? This is an opportunity for the prospective A/E firm to clarify the project and can reveal important points to the client team.

The detailed questionnaire should be reviewed by the client team. Also, requests for clarifications should be forwarded from the client team to the A/E firm before interviews are scheduled.

The Interview Process

The interviews should allow sufficient time for each firm to present its approach to the project, past projects, current key issues in design of health facilities, and for discussion. At the interview, observe the following:

- **Architectural design culture:** Does the firm value “high quality” architectural design? Who is the director of design? Is he at the interview?
- **Communications:** How well will the team communicate with the client and with each other? Send “trial” communications and see how well and quickly they respond.
- **Listening skills:** Do the A/E firm principals and staff value the ability to listen to others? Or is the A/E firm doing all the talking?

- **Attitude:** What do you perceive the firm's attitude is toward your queries? Is the firm thorough and enthusiastic—does it really want to undertake your project?
- **Responsiveness:** How responsive is the team to your queries and concerns? Do team members return calls and e-mails in a timely manner?
- **Enthusiasm:** What level for the project do you detect?
- **Codes and guidelines:** Did the firm participate in development of and fully utilize the *AIA/FGI Guidelines for the Design and Construction of Health Care Facilities* document?
- **Interview clients:** In-depth interviews with former clients could take place by visiting their health facilities and having detailed meetings with administrators, medical

staff nurses and maintenance staff.

• **Interview construction firm:** Interviews of construction firms with which the architectural firm previously has been involved (for the evaluation of the A/E firm's performance) could be undertaken.

After the Interview

There should be discussions by the client team after each interview and at the conclusion of all interviews.

• **Site visits:** Site visits may be necessary after the interview process is completed. Visiting the firm's office to spend time with all the staff that will be assigned to your project is valuable. Also, site visits to past architectural projects, together with the owner client, are valuable. A combination of visits to recent, as well as projects completed five, 10, 15 and 20 years ago is recommended.

- **Matrix comparison:** A matrix of comparative information should be developed so that after the interview process is complete, an in-depth analysis, comparison and discussion of the project can commence.
- **Ranking the A/E firms:** The firms should be ranked in order based on their overall experience, quality of

designs and end results.

The successful selection of the best A/E firm for your project should be the result of a methodical, analytical and well-organized process. However, after all is said and done, there is no substitute for intuition, on-site observation, common sense and logic. ■



Joseph G. Sprague, FAIA, FACHA, FHFI, is a senior vice president and director of health facilities at HKS, an international design firm specializing in health facilities. He serves as

health facilities principal and technical adviser on various healthcare projects. He can be reached at (214) 969-3360 or via e-mail at jsprague@hksinc.com.



George J. Mann, AIA, is the Skaggs-Sprague Endowed Chair of Health Facilities Design at the College of Architecture, Texas A&M University. He is also the founder and chairman of the RPD (Resource Planning

and Development) Group, and president of Global University Programs in Healthcare Architecture. He can be reached at (979) 845-7856 or via e-mail at gmann@archone.tamu.edu.

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