



Proactive engineering: Asking the right questions to ensure a successful project by Matt Grobert and Jessica Vail

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It is often anticipated that taking on a large construction project will likely lead to the dreaded “change order.” A change order includes work that is added (or removed) from the original scope; which could cause a change in the overall project’s pricing and timeline. As a precaution, it can be factored into the loan and financial planning in the form of a contingency, which is typically a

percentage of the initial estimated cost of the project. But, depending on the defined engineering scope this may occur in the design phase; when an item is not included in the engineer's scope of work, which can cause issues during construction.

It is imperative to understand the entire scope of work that the engineer will be providing. Make sure that the bids are "level" and comparing "apples to apples" when choosing an engineer. To ask for a specification to be prepared for a scope of work could mean different things to different engineering firms. The best way to alleviate the possibility of receiving proposals with different scopes is for the manager to provide the engineering firms with a detailed Request for Proposal (RFP) that requests specific services the association wants included.

Some important questions to ask may include: Is a physical site inspection included? Who is preparing the specification; the engineer/architect or a project manager or an intern? Will a meeting with the board be included in the price or at least available as an option to review the design and specifications of the project? It is not as simple as who is the cheapest or which office is the closest to the site.

When selecting a professional, it is important to remember: "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is." Looking solely at price is the easiest way to miss important details and fine print. Review the proposal and ask questions. Make sure that all the professionals, who you reached out to, have an opportunity to explain the plans and details, if awarded the job.

Why is this important? An engineering firm is hired to do a roof specification. They have one that they recently did for an association that had the same builder. They feel they can save some time, use a "canned" specification and they will work out the kinks on-site during construction. The engineering firm is unaware of the different sub-contractors that the developer used on the different sites. On the original site, the developer missed certain items, that by the second site were fixed, however other items were missed that are not addressed properly in the new specifications. The roof replacement starts and as they are tearing off the existing roof, they discover major defects in the framing and fire rated assemblies between units in the attics. Now, because an engineer provided a specification that does not include structural corrections or line item costs for framing, they will have to stop work and call out the engineer to investigate the issues so that corrective actions may be taken before the roof work continues. Here is where the "change order" comes into play: New details and specifications need to be prepared, new materials need to be ordered, everyone's time is wasted, more money is spent, homeowners are unhappy, board is screaming and the community manager needs a glass of wine.

Every job is unique! Thorough attention should be given before the job is awarded and the work begins. While there is no way to prevent the unknown, even with a thorough site inspection and proper planning, surprises will pop up. However, being thorough from the start and anticipating the problem before it arises means that you have a "Proactive Engineer". They have the associations best interest as a priority, which ultimately makes the manager look good. This is very rarely the lowest priced company; however, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The best way to choose an engineering firm for a capital replacement project is to have the board interview them

and ask questions about the firm and the proposal they submitted. Below are a few questions to consider when reaching out to professional engineers (and architects) for plans and/or specifications to ensure that you hire a proactive professional vs. a reactive one.

Questions to ask while reviewing proposals:

1. Are these proposals leveled? If not, then talk to your professionals and find out exactly what is involved.
2. Will the professional physically walk the site? Depending on the scope of work this may or may not be necessary. Speak with each professional bidding on the job to get their input, not just one.
3. How qualified is the professional preparing my specification? Is it a registered architect (RA) or professional engineer (PE), certified building inspector or an intern?
4. Will you be attending a board meeting, in person, or via phone or zoom? It is important to have professional answers for your board and homeowners. Keep in mind a good professional has done many more of these types of projects than the average property manager. Lean on your expert and pick their brain.
5. Will you be on site at all during construction? Regular visits are an important component to ensure that the work is being started and completed properly. What is the credibility and experience of the construction observers on site?

Asking the right questions is a paramount in making sure the project is successful and stays on schedule and within budget.

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