



Not all civil engineers are created equal: Five tips for choosing an engineer for your next project

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So, you're looking to hire a civil engineer to help you design and prepare construction documents for a new project, and you're just starting the process of finding one. If this is something new to you, where do you begin? Who and what should you look for?

Selecting an engineer is an important process, since the wrong selection could cost significantly in terms of time and money. A poor design can run up your overall construction costs with change orders, and unfamiliarity with local regulatory and municipal processes can delay your approvals and permits. The right engineer will help transform your vision into reality without sacrificing your time and budget. Here are some helpful tips for the selection process:

1. Screen your short list. Once you've done your homework, you'll be ready to get into specifics with your short list of site civil engineers. In all likelihood, your project will require review by your local municipality (e.g. city, town, village, etc.) for zoning compliance and site plan approval. In addition, the project may need approval from federal, state, and county regulatory agencies for improvements such as a new driveway entrance connection onto a public road or the abandonment of an existing onsite sanitary system. Other examples requiring regulatory review would be an improvement in close proximity to regulated wetlands, or if the site generates stormwater discharge to public surface waters.

Your civil engineer would be responsible for preparing and submitting plans to these entities, resolving comments, and obtaining municipal and regulatory approvals for your proposed improvements. In this case, not only must you find the right civil engineer—one who is competent and knowledgeable of preparing construction drawings—but you must also find a civil engineer who is adept at navigating the regulatory process within municipalities and agencies, so approvals can be obtained in a timely manner and your project can proceed on schedule.

2. Take shortlisted engineers on a site visit. This meeting is your opportunity for them to understand your project scope and for you to ask questions. This will also be their opportunity to ask questions, which will give you insight into their understanding of your project.

3. Check references and credentials. Ask each civil engineer for recent references from clients they've performed similar work for within the same municipality. Speak with these clients to find out how the engineer performed on the project, and how they did relative to their schedule and budget.

When a project requires approval from a government agency or official, it requires the services of a licensed design professional. To offer their services to the public, engineers must hold a Professional Engineer's (PE) license for the state in which they offer services. Check and verify that your civil engineer is state licensed and currently registered as a PE. Also, check to see if there have been any recent disciplinary actions filed against the civil engineer. All 50 states have laws that govern the engineering practice, and each state board of professional engineers is responsible for

enforcing licensing requirements. In New York, you can check and verify this information through the Office of Professions at <http://www.op.nysed.gov/>.

4. Verify insurance. Confirm that each engineer can provide you with current certificates of insurance for general liability, workers compensation and professional liability. These policies will cover you in case there is an accident involving the engineer or there are errors or omissions on the plan documents and drawings prepared under the engineer's supervision.

5. Don't base your decision on cost alone. Once you've reduced your list of potential firms to two or three firms, request a detailed proposal of the services provided, fee structure, and schedule. Give the firms the same amount of time to prepare. Carefully review each proposal based on qualifications, service offerings, diligence, and costs. And while cost is a significant factor, be careful not to select your engineer on cost alone. A detailed understanding of the project, along with the right range of complementary services, will demonstrate that the civil engineer has taken time to think carefully through the project to arrive at the fee. Selecting the lowest fee may result in added costs later.

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