

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

How Architects Can Land a Government Contract

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By Bruce Buckley

With government projects getting a boost through the economic stimulus package while many private sector plans remain in limbo, the playing field for finding new work is quickly changing. As federally funded projects begin to ramp up quickly, firms with little to no experience in public sector work are eyeing opportunities to get in the game. But landing public contracts can be a challenge for the uninitiated without smart strategies.

“Essentially, you’re in the game or not in the game,” says Gerald Hines, a Maryland-based architect and chair of the Public Architects Committee for the American Institute of Architects (AIA). “If you’re not, that’s a problem. It can be very frustrating and a lot of people give up. But if you do your homework and make smart decisions, you can get in and find it very valuable.”



Photo courtesy SmithGroup

The architecture firm SmithGroup is working on a three-phase project to modernize the Eisenhower Executive Office Building in Washington, D.C.

Benefits of partnering

The level of requirements for winning government contracts—such as those outlined in the Federal Acquisition Regulations—and other standards of qualification are significant. As stewards of taxpayer money, agencies are generally more risk averse than private developers, Hines says.

But there are savvy ways to approach the process. Firms that are new to federal contracting can get a quick lesson through partnering, says Anthony Bell, chief of small business programs at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Bell notes that on average, it takes small businesses 18 months to land their first prime contract. “Everyone wants to be a prime contractor, they don’t want to be a bridesmaid,” he says. “Being a sub is a good learning process. Let someone else navigate the structure while you sit back and learn.”

With the economic stimulus package expected to provide a near-term spike in work, many firms that already work in the public sector could be forced to reach out to others for support. “Our attitude is, we don’t want to add staff just for the near-term,” says Carl Roeling, president and CEO of SmithGroup. “We’ll try to find ways to get work done through partners first.”

Where to look

Whether you’re looking to land a contract as a prime or a sub, the government’s clearinghouse for information on federal contracts is [FedBizOpps](#). Firms can search for new jobs on the site, but they can also track the firms that have won contracts and may be looking for subs, says Tamela Riggs, deputy assistant commissioner for the U.S. General Services Administration’s Office of Acquisition Management. Contract holders can also be found through [GSA’s online schedules program](#). “We find that companies say [those

sites] are helpful for finding prime contract holders that they can reach out to for mentoring or partnering opportunities,” Riggs adds.

Who has a leg up?

Emerging delivery methods could also boost prospects for federal work. In recent years, public agencies have been increasingly open to design-build and other integrated delivery devices. With the federal government under pressure to move projects quickly, agencies are likely to draw on such methods even more, says James Wright, principal at Page Southerland Page in Arlington, Virginia. “What that speaks to is the need to have solid relationships with a builder,” he says. “If [the builder] is the prime contractor pursuing the job, that’s an excellent opportunity for a [design] firm.”

Small businesses or firms that are minority-owned, women-owned, or service-disabled veteran-owned could also find themselves in a strong position in the coming months. All federal projects contain set-aside goals for contracting such firms. Often, agencies are challenged to find enough companies to meet contract obligations.

As funding for projects under the Base Realignment and Closure Act has ramped up in recent years, so has funding for small and disadvantaged businesses. In fiscal year 2008, the Corps of Engineers bolstered its small business program by \$1 billion. However, as a percentage of total funding, it decreased in light of a limited availability of firms who meet the standards. Despite the challenge, the mission to bring in such firms remains, Bell says. “Regulations state that small business should be considered first for all requirements,” he says. “We take that commitment seriously. It holds true for BRAC and it will continue to hold true for the stimulus.”

Do your research

Agency representatives concede that getting up to speed on federal procurement standards and processes can be overwhelming, but doing your homework and knowing your client can help. Agencies offer varying degrees of support for first-time bidders, including online resources and contracting agents assigned to answer questions. The Defense Department has [Procurement Technical Assistance Centers](#) in all 50 states, which offer free or nominal cost classes and other assistance on federal contracting.

Knowing how your firm’s strengths fit with agency demands is also critical, Hines says. Addressing sustainability issues, for example, is now mandated on many federal projects. Building information modeling is also a requirement for many agencies. “You need to make clear how you differentiate yourself from others and can meet very specific project goals,” he explains.

Take the long view

For firms taking a longer view of federal opportunities, Hines recommends pursuing indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity contracts. Through IDIQ, agencies can fulfill needs quickly as they arise. “IDIQ essentially pre-qualifies you and places you on a preferred list so that you can be in place on projects within a matter of a few months,” he says.

Even if firms can’t get in the game fast enough to take advantage of the looming stimulus funding, Hines notes that public projects will continue to move forward in the coming years while private work remains uncertain. “For the long haul,” he says, “it’s better to get off the dime and get through the process now.”