

Vendor mad about maintenance bids

By GREG GILES NEWS EDITOR VENICE GONDOLIER

A vendor is crying foul after city staff abandoned its No. 1 pick under a city-issued request for proposals and instead suggested the city outsource fleet maintenance to the county.

Aubrey Felton, regional representative of First Vehicle Services, said the city didn't follow its own RFP process, and improperly extrapolated figures to compare his company's fixed-cost proposal with county estimates.

Felton called staff's recommendation, which was based partly on the findings of an RFP selection committee, a "clear violation of state Sunshine law" negotiated "in a back-room scenario."

Acting City Manager Nancy Woodley assured council the RFP process was properly followed, even if the responses make it difficult to compare apples to apples. At this point, she said, staff is asking if council still wants to move in this direction.

Following discussion, city council directed staff to reconsider its options.

Elected officials raised concerns with the county's \$89 hourly charge, and other bids whose "out-of-target" rates were not scoped out in the original bid. According to Finance Director Jeff Snyder, 73 percent of the city's fleet is considered 'out-of target.'

Debbie Gardow, solid waste department director, said the county's fleet maintenance department, which is rated in the top 100 in the country, currently doesn't work on garbage trucks and would have to be trained. It also doesn't service fire rescue units, according to Felton.

"That's a concern to me. (And they) have to have a person with a CEO license to deliver" the vehicles, Gardow said.

Mayor John Holic had other issues with the county's bid, such as staff's explanation of the county's assurance it has excess capacity and could therefore handle the city's workload in a timely and efficient manner.

"The excess capacity of the county troubles me," Holic said. "(That) means we'll get to you when we can. What assurance do we have of the same rights as county vehicles?"

All-American Imports, the current fleet maintenance provider, presented a bid based on hourly rates and sample costs, not fixed costs as required in the RFP.

Felton said for that reason the All-American Imports bid should have been found non-responsive to the RFP.

"When you ask someone how much they will charge you, if they can change that at any time (that) can have a big impact on your overall costs," Utilities Director Len Bramble said.

"If we don't know that ... we are going to constantly" be exploited, said Council Member Bob Daniels. "Not to have established rates, I think, is the wrong way to go."

In 2007 the city began prodding All-American Imports for fleet records to track repairs and help budget for future replacement costs. In early 2008, Bramble met with other department directors to flesh out other issues, like excessive oil change charges, and again asked for the ability to track repairs.

The former city information technology director, according to Council Member Kit McKeon, said tracking the repairs couldn't be done in-house.

All-American's Jeff Hazeltine suggested the city purchase its own software for an estimated \$135,000.

"I believe it would be in the best interest of the city to purchase the software system to continue with management of the fleet," Hazeltine said recently.

In 2009, with one year left on its contract with All-American Imports, the city decided to contact the county to see if it would be interested in partnering.

Later, the city requested an RFP for cost comparison purposes, but didn't require the county to participate.

In the end, Bramble said, it would cost the city \$1 million annually to bring fleet maintenance completely in-house, compared to private vendors and the county, which all came in slightly more than \$900,000.

Holic presented a list of 10 questions asking department directors to comment on the effectiveness of the current vendor.

"I don't like to go against recommendations of staff," said Council Member Emilio Carlesimo, "but in this case what I've heard is the vendor is doing a good job, but (the contract) needs to be tweaked. I'm in favor of giving our local vendor an opportunity to meet the needs of the city, even if he has to hire an information technology person."

"Three of his employees are Venice citizens," Daniels added. "We need to identify the disconnects. Mr. Hazeltine needs to sit down with us and work out the kinks."

"I'm not comfortable with the alternatives," said Council Member Kit McKeon. "Let's take a deep breath and one more look."

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