

Quality over price, say engineers and architects



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Engineers and architects oppose the lowest bidder rule.

With an estimated \$135 billion invested in the Plan québécois des infrastructures, the Legault government must resist the temptation to follow the lowest bidder rule when awarding public contracts if it wants to get value for its money, engineers and architects warn.

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This recommendation is at the heart of the 33 suggestions in the most recent roadmap presented on Tuesday by the Association des firmes de génie-conseil (AFG) and the Association des architectes en pratique privée du Québec (AAPPQ), two organizations that are anxiously awaiting the unveiling of Quebec's public procurement strategy.

La Presse was able to consult the document containing the recommendations. "The design phase represents a maximum of 2% of a project's total life-cycle cost," said AFG President and CEO Bernard Bigras. "Neglecting this phase is [...] totally unacceptable."

Both associations fear that the strategy could lead to a bill that would amend the *Act respecting contracting by public bodies*, which governs more than 400 departments and agencies (such as the Ministère des Transports) and weaken the criterion of competence in the selection of architectural and engineering firms.

Philippe Couillard's Liberal government wanted to amend the law in 2018, which would have made it possible to follow the lowest bidder rule, but finally abandoned the idea.

"We shouldn't be seeking to do business with a firm that will do the least amount of work in the shortest amount of time on a contract," said Lyne Parent, Executive Director of the AAPPQ. "This [the principle of the lowest bidder] is what we find in the municipalities, and these are the contracts that we heard discussed most often at the Charbonneau commission."

Mr. Bigras believes that the quality aspect should count for 90% of the evaluation when it comes to hiring a firm. Price should count for only 10%.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE ASSOCIATION DES FIRMES DE GÉNIE-CONSEIL

Bernard Bigras and Lyne Parent head the Association des firmes de génie-conseil and the Association des architectes en pratique privée du Québec, respectively.

With a few exceptions, representatives of architects and engineers say they “adhere” to the Legault government’s economic vision with regard to matters such as local purchasing and production and the lower carbon economy. Florence Plourde, press secretary to the president of the Treasury Board, Sonia LeBel, would only say that the procurement strategy will be released in the “coming weeks.” Plourde did not provide a timeline or any items that will be included in the strategy.

If the lowest bidder is selected, it would make the process more predictable, said Nicholas Jobidon, assistant professor at the National School of Public Administration. However, it is “completely false” that this practice “forces” a public agency to procure lower-quality products.

“The public agency may, in conformity with the rule, determine its needs as it sees fit, and may therefore look for products of the quality it desires. And if a bidder offers a cheaper but lower-quality product, their bid will be rejected, and the contract will go to the lowest bidder that meets the agency’s needs,” he explains.

However, some contractors have difficulties with this approach, which creates “logistical and administrative complexities” such as setting up a committee and grading bidders’ submissions.

Salaries and local content

The AFG and AAPPQ are also asking Quebec to index the maximum allowable hourly rates for architectural and engineering services provided to the government, which have been frozen since 2009.

In today's tight labour market, these rates should grow at least at the same pace as inflation, said Mr. Bigras and Ms. Parent. Otherwise, firms' interest in public procurement will continue to decline.

"This is weakening firms in the regions of Quebec," said Mr. Bigras. If I'm a young engineering firm in Trois-Rivières, I can't recruit someone and pay them at the 2009 rate."

Premier François Legault has said repeatedly that he wants as much local content as possible when public contracts are awarded.

While both associations agree with this sentiment, they also want to see the principle applied to professional services, a move they believe would generate more impact, particularly in the regions.

"In architecture, for instance, there is a lot of focus on the challenges faced by SMEs," said Ms. Parent. "It's important to help them survive and have a presence province-wide. We're in a buoyant period in the construction industry. It's important to develop and support expertise in Quebec."

The two associations submitted recommendations in the fall of 2020. They have returned their attention to the issue as the date for the government strategy approaches.

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Number of actors in architecture (over 400) and engineering (48) represented by the two associations

Credit: La Presse