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Municipalities in New Brunswick have QBS on their radar

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By: *Andrew Safer*

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The use of qualifications-based selection (QBS) by municipalities for the procurement and asset management of municipal infrastructure is taking a step forward in New Brunswick, thanks to a collaboration between the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies—New Brunswick (ACEC-NB) and the Union of Municipalities of New Brunswick (UMNB).

Following ACEC-NB's presentation to the UMNB Board in November on best practices for hiring a professional consultant, the consulting engineering companies association, representing 29 firms, was invited to educate small municipalities on practices in selecting a professional consultant. The UMNB represents 58 small municipalities out of a total of 104 (the city of Fredericton is also a member).

"Many small municipalities have a firm they've been dealing with for years," says UMNB Executive Director Raymond Murphy, "and they rely on them for all their decisions."

Murphy favours adopting a process that would enable municipalities to determine objectively which firms are the most qualified to do the work, citing a sewer line break in Rexton about a decade ago as an example. When the road was dug up, different sizes of pipe were found with connections that had been reduced with couplings. "This had been done quite haphazardly, and created all kinds of problems," Murphy recalls. "Had a qualifications-based system been in place, this wouldn't have happened. Hopefully, we can get into a qualifications-based system which would work more to the benefit of all municipalities."

Asked if paying more to have the job done right the first time is a solution that is acceptable politically, he replied, "Taxpayers are beginning to realize that the short-term fix is not always the proper way."

The majority of ACEC-NB's member firms are in favour of QBS, reports ACEC-NB President Georges Roy. He adds that there are already jurisdictions across Canada such as the cities of London and Calgary, that are practicing QBS.

Roy says that smaller companies can be just as competitive as larger firms even if they have to include outside experts on their project teams. And, of course, smaller firms may have senior people with equivalent qualifications to those in a larger firm.

The advantages of QBS, Roy says, include encouraging innovation and sustainability, and ultimately adding value. "If there's a really tight budget or unusually challenging project," he says, "you may not want to go with the usual way of doing things. QBS gives more leeway to the engineer to look at innovation."

ACEC-NB and UMNB are also discussing hosting education sessions on asset management and infrastructure planning.

A key impetus for the two organizations to collaborate is to make a strong case for funding. "The federal government likes to receive one message, rather than eight or ten," says Murphy. He adds that a lack of investment in recent years has contributed to the accumulation of approximately \$600 million in required infrastructure repairs in the province's 104 municipalities. He points out that the partnership will assist the municipalities in developing sound strategies and plans. "They will know exactly what they want the money for and where it will be used," he adds, "and will be able to show the benefits and value of the investment to the taxpayers and government agencies who help subsidize the work."

Andrew Safer is a writer based in St. John's, Newfoundland.