
Lessons Learned from the Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia's First Collaborative Solar RFP



Funded by a grant from the United States Department of Energy's SunShot Initiative, the Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia's (CICV) A Solar Market Pathway for Independent Colleges in Virginia seeks to reduce the soft costs of solar energy for Virginia Private Colleges by creating a replicable model for collaborative solar procurement and using existing expertise to increase solar energy adoption throughout the Commonwealth.

CICV, with crucial assistance from Optony, the solar consulting firm working with this project, and representatives of participating Virginia Private Colleges drafted the first collaborative solar request for proposals (RFP) for Solar Photovoltaic Projects in early- to mid-2015. The RFP requested pricing for purchasing solar photovoltaic arrays outright, and for power purchase agreements (PPA). The Request for Proposals for Solar Photovoltaic Projects is available at <https://commons.marymount.edu/cicvsola/cicv-solar-market-pathways-information-hub/>. The partners released the RFP in November 2015, and received seven responsive proposals by the deadline of January 22, 2016. A committee comprising staff and administration representatives from six participating

institutions, CICV staff, and Optony's project manager, reviewed the proposals and scored them.

Since there were 15 private colleges participating in this procurement, the goal of this process was to produce an executable contract requiring minimal additional negotiation by each of the participating institutions. CICV and Optony negotiated with the highest-scoring bidder over the course of Summer 2016 to resolve exceptions to the draft PPA and create a document that would protect the colleges' interests and meet the standard policies and procedures of a minimum of 15 independent colleges. The negotiation process was slowed by major personnel changes at CICV and Optony, which necessitated bringing new team members up to speed on the project. Negotiations were completed in September 2016, and the preferred vendor began discussions with individual colleges in late October 2016.

To assist other coalitions seeking to replicate this collaborative procurement model, CICV, Optony, and the participating independent colleges have documented the following lessons learned. Applying these lessons to future projects may help other groups streamline and compress their procurement process.

Procurement Team Structure

- 1) Whenever possible, at least one representative from each organization participating in the collaborative procurement should be someone involved in procurement for her organization. This will help insure the procurement document meets each organization's procurement policies, and that a member of the organization's procurement team is familiar with the history and goals of the project. If it is not possible for a representative from a organization's procurement team to participate in the collaborative group, make sure that person or team is informed about the procurement and kept up-to-date as the procurement progresses. This will help prevent duplication of effort once the top-scoring vendor(s) begins direct negotiations with each participating organization, and can

prevent confusion that might arise out of the procurement team's unfamiliarity with the project.

- 2) If no one in the collaborative procurement group has a solid familiarity with the solar industry, including the financing options for purchasing solar photovoltaic arrays/solar power and current pricing for solar photovoltaic equipment and/or solar power, the group should have access to an outside consultant with such expertise. This person could be a staff member from one of the participating organizations, or a consultant hired by the group or a participating member.

Project Continuity

- 3) One person in the collaborative procurement group should be identified as project manager. This person should be responsible for insuring the documentation and dissemination of information concerning the procurement process, and for following up to make sure tasks are being accomplished on the timeline established by the group.
- 4) Each participating member of the collaborative procurement group should maintain her own file of meeting minutes, drafts of the procurement documents, and other critical files. These files will provide documentation and points of reference for members during their organization's individual negotiation. In the event of personnel changes in the collaborative procurement team/individual negotiations, this file will help familiarize new members to the project, and will ensure continuity of, and minimize delays in, the procurement process.

Design of RFP Documents

- 5) The members of the procuring entity should include specific terms and conditions (e.g., contractor insurance requirements, adherence to the Davis-Bacon Act for construction projects, Federal/State disbarment of

contractors, etc.) required by their organizations in any draft contract or agreement included in the solicitation document. If there are significant differences in these requirements among the collaborating organizations, an advisor in the subject in question should review and make recommendations before the solicitation is advertised.

Other key contract terms, such as the structure of a resulting deal, should also be included as part of the RFP documents, and the procurement team should point them out to proposers during a pre-proposal conference. Such contract terms are not standard within the industry, so proposals that appear similar may have been created under different assumptions about the way the deal with the end user will be structured. These assumptions can make a big difference in value. The CICV procurement included a template contract and allowed proposers to submit exceptions, which was helpful in ensuring the evaluation committee's comparisons between bids were on level ground (or at least, knowing when comparisons were not level).

Proposal Evaluation

- 6) The proposal evaluation process should include a defined scoring system with set criteria, weighting, and guidelines for assigning scores. Many proposals will be of similar quality and the size and complexity of the proposals makes a comprehensive and objective evaluation difficult without established guidelines. The CICV procurement used a 100 point scale with very specific sub-criteria, which aided in evaluating proposals that had similar pricing and benefits.
- 7) Follow up interviews can be useful in helping to decide between proposals that have scored similarly. These follow-up interviews should have set agendas and be focused on the handful of items that need clarification or could be differentiators. The CICV procurement utilized follow-up interviews with a short list of proposers to aid in final decision. The initial

format of these interviews had too much open ended discussion which did not aid in differentiating between proposers; the interviews were more successful when a more targeted approach was used.

- 8) Multiple members of the selection committee should score proposals independently. This helps to ensure decisions are not being made unilaterally. Additionally, having evaluators from different roles and perspectives helps to ensure the best overall proposals are selected. The CICV selection committee included representatives from the organizations along with members who specialized in solar and in law.