

Working with Architects— Beyond the Architecture

Architectural firms offer myriad services that are only loosely connected to what some would consider “architecture.”

By Stephen Chassee

Some districts have entire departments focused on capital projects and staff dedicated to project management, including creating budgets, overseeing contractors, and even performing some of the work themselves. Other districts barely have the staff necessary to oversee the preventative maintenance of district facilities.

Whether yours is a large, sophisticated district with a robust facility department or a small district with nothing more than a maintenance staff, an architect can be immeasurably valuable. From conceptual planning and design to emergency evacuation plans and replacement cost analysis, most architectural firms offer myriad services that are only loosely connected to what some would consider “architecture.”

Planning Ahead

Few districts build new schools or construct additions every year; therefore, the supplementary services an architect can provide will be the bedrock of the relationship and the basis of interaction year after year.

One of the most important documents that you can create with your architect is your district’s annual schedule based on the master plan. Working together to create this

schedule keeps the district and the architect on track for planning next year’s projects and ensuring that this year’s projects do not disrupt student learning.

The long-range plan will guide you in answering board of education questions about the budget for future expenditures or seeking guidance on large capital projects, as well as annual maintenance. The school board will know how and

when to levy taxes to ensure that funds are available to complete the necessary projects.

As you create the annual schedule, you and the architect will work backward from the date of the first day of school to fit your timeline. Together you will proceed from conceptual design, through design development, to a set of contract documents. These documents will be used to procure the proper



PROJECT APPROACH / PROPOSED SCHEDULE



One of the most important documents districts create with architects is a master plan.

permits and to find the most responsible contractors for the project.

Project Underway

Once a project is underway, the architect will be your eyes and ears on the jobsite, assisting with construction oversight to whatever degree the district deems necessary to ensure that the ideas and plans you created together have a positive outcome.

The district must be very direct about whom they want the architect to engage with, who will be involved in the project, and who the final decision makers will be. During the project, the architect should expect to engage with district personnel involved in the design, construction, planning, or maintenance of the facilities. Architects are sometimes asked to work directly with a single point of contact; other times, they work with several people, including the superintendent, business manager, facility director, technology director, curriculum personnel, and sometimes students and the community. The engagement process is critical to a good relationship between the district and the architect.

Review meetings are held at each step of the design process. The architect should meet with a cross section of internal personnel who are not directly involved in the project to critique design and quality elements that the district has requested. As plans are developed, the review meetings will help assess design assumptions against real-world conditions.

At the beginning of the design process, discussions will highlight such areas as labor, specified equipment, or material shortages that will affect the project; building systems will be reviewed to determine the most efficient way to accomplish the district's objective.

Keeping in mind the district's best interest in being a good steward of taxpayer dollars, the architect will do what is necessary to achieve district goals. Once the plans have been approved and the project is ready for bidding, the architect will continue applying control measures while soliciting and encouraging as many local qualified contractors as possible to bid on the project. Involving local contractors will help ensure the best possible outcome for the district and the community.

Once the contract has been awarded, the architect will provide objective oversight of project quality, coordination, and scheduling. The architect should have a good jobsite presence that compels communications between the district, the contractors, and the architect. Every aspect of the project will be documented, including field reports, photography, meeting notes, cost accounting, and as-built documents resulting in a valuable project history. This information will be vital to recording the

The architect should have a good jobsite presence that compels communications between the district, the contractors, and the architect.

project's history and will help solidify a long-lasting relationship between the district and the architect.

Moving Forward

Following construction, preventative maintenance is key to limiting the number of unforeseen circumstances. Emergency repairs can be costly and often are caused by a lack of preventative maintenance. The architect—in conjunction with the district maintenance and facilities team—can help avoid those costly repairs and can prepare annual budgets and timelines for replacing aging equipment. This life-cycle cost analysis will also help the district select appropriate materials and equipment for the future.

A good architect will ensure that the district does not throw good money after bad. Architects attend continuing education seminars to keep up with federal, state, and local codes for egress, Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, fire, and safety and security. It is their job to ensure that every project meets not only the district's needs but also the requirements of all governing bodies. Such mindfulness helps the district protect itself from having to make repairs or adjustments after project completion or having to tear down a structure.

The best way to ensure that your district's facilities will be not only safe and secure learning environments, but also sustainable buildings for years to come, is to maintain a working relationship with your architect of record. The architect needs the financial and historical data that you can provide, and you need the technical expertise that only he or she can provide you. That give-and-take relationship can be the foundation for effective budgeting.

Stephen Chassee is associate principal for Green Associates in Deerfield, Illinois. Email: schassee@greenassociates.com