



Selecting and Purchasing a Computer for Use in Local Government

Mike D. Woods, Gregory S. Taylor and Dennis U. Fisher*

Local governments are experiencing an ever-increasing need for management information and a greatly expanded reporting workload. Many large governments rely on computers to handle some of these tasks. With the cost of data processing equipment dropping and the capacity increasing, computers are being offered as viable management aids for small and medium sized city or county governments. A computer may or may not be appropriate for a particular government use. A seven-step process is suggested below to aid in evaluating the need for and purchase of an electronic data processing system.¹

Selecting a consultant

Generally, a consultant with both computer experience and government experience is ideal to assess objectively the costs and benefits of conversion to computer technology. Colleges or university Extension services and private consulting firms can assist with or suggest sources for this consultation.

If you choose not to hire a consultant, someone else must perform the essential functions of a consultant. These include bridging the gap between the language of computers and the functioning of local government. Successful bridging of this gap is critical to assess computer needs accurately, to select the appropriate hardware and software, and to facilitate the transition to the computer.

To find the right consultant, a letter describing the services needed by the government could be sent to known consultants and/or published in local newspapers or professional magazines. A more informal method, which is usually quite effective, is to talk with others who have used consultant services in acquiring computer systems. These contacts should be able to identify several consultants as well as evaluate their services. Government officials could then contact the consultants to determine if they are interested in the project.

Often, government officials may identify someone within the organization to serve as a consultant (or someone within the community willing to devote time and expertise to the effort). If this individual has the proper background and interest, this is a viable option. Other counties or cities have appointed committees to work together to fulfill the consultant role. There are trade-offs associated with this decision, but it is up to the local government to decide what is best for its needs. For the remainder of this fact sheet, the

term consultant will be used to refer to the individual or group serving as an advisor to the government on computer matters.

Scheduling of future activities

A time-table or schedule should be set up at the first meeting of the consultant and the local government leaders. Although exact dates may have to be changed during the project, scheduling in advance has two major advantages. First of all, scheduling avoids "dragging out" the process. Usually, the activity levels of both the consultant and the local official are such that unless specific blocks of time are reserved, the scheduling of other activities will preclude giving adequate time and attention to the local government's computer needs.

The second advantage of scheduling is that it allows the officials and staff to plan to attend all the presentations, demonstrations, meetings and planning sessions. It is vital to the success of a computer system that the staff be involved in all steps of the process. Work schedules need to be arranged so that as many personnel can participate as possible, especially those in key positions.

Conducting the needs study²

The purpose of the study is six-fold: (1) to establish rapport with key individuals who will be making decisions about and using the system; (2) to determine the most important problems in the individual offices; (3) to reduce fear of electronic data processing by increasing the knowledge of the staff; (4) to determine whether a genuine need for electronic data processing exists; (5) to determine the computer capacity required to handle the volume of records and files of the various offices; and (6) to familiarize the consultant with local requirements to prevent oversights.

A workload survey is conducted by interviewing the personnel in each office. The objectives of the survey are to find out (1) what is being done currently, (2) how it is being done, and (3) why it is being done. To find out what is being done, questions are asked concerning the extent of the responsibilities of each office. For example, the County Clerk in most counties keeps the records of the Commissioners Court and the County Courts (criminal, civil and probate). In addition, the clerk is responsible for filing, indexing and recording all legal instruments affecting real property titles.³ The exact responsibilities, method of operation and volume or size of operation all affect the computer needs of each office of a county or city.

As part of the needs study process, a briefing should be conducted for government officials and staff members, introducing them to computer technology. In-

*Community Services Specialist, Community Development Specialist, and Economist-Business Development, respectively, with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service.



struction should include a simple overview of the components of electronic data processing and their functions, using non-technical terms where possible. All abbreviations commonly used in the computer industry should be defined. This briefing should inform officials and employees of what an electronic data processing system does well, as well as its limitations.

Preparing and distributing the request for proposal

The Request for Proposal (RFP) is a document which comprises the bid specifications for a complete computer system (hardware, software, training and maintenance). Using the results of the needs analysis, the consultant will specify in the RFP the areas to be automated, the volume of work and the expected growth of the workload. In addition, the RFP states a schedule for obtaining the prices and proposals. For larger government organizations, the RFP will announce the date and time for a pre-bid vendors' conference. The list of vendors is drawn from both national and local sources. The consultant will usually have a standard list to which are added names of local firms that may be interested. The pre-bid conference is conducted by the consultant for the benefit of vendors who desire to have more information. The conference usually lasts 1 to 1½ hours, and is held at the courthouse or municipal building. Conducting the conference at the courthouse also allows prospective vendors to view the facilities where the computer will be located.

The official copies of vendors' proposals are received by the county or city in the same manner as bids for other equipment. In addition, each vendor sends a copy directly to the consultant. Once the consultant has the proposals in hand, he/she will summarize the information received in a written report. After the written report has been reviewed by the local government, an oral report is presented by the consultant.

Most cities or counties will want to prepare a formal request for proposal as described above. Remember, however, when you walk into a retail computer store and ask what type of computers are available, that this could be an informal request. The idea is to communicate to the vendor the tasks that you wish to automate and what you expect from the vendor. Regardless of size of government or complexity of the RFP, this should be well thought out before you decide to purchase a computer.

Vendor demonstrations and final evaluation

Assuming that the officials are satisfied with the proposals received, the next step is to schedule and conduct vendor demonstrations. All vendor demonstrations should be scheduled and conducted within one week. Demonstrations may be held at the courthouse, the nearest branch office of the hardware manufacturer, or at a county or city office that has its system up and running. Seeing a system actually doing the desired tasks is one of the best evaluation tools.

After vendor demonstrations have been completed, the consultant, local officials and staff must carry out the final evaluation. Seven basic areas for evaluation include (1) hardware, (2) system software, (3) application software, (4) training, (5) vendor quality, (6) maintenance/support, and (7) method of purchase and cost. In the consultant's final evaluation and

recommendations, each proposed system should be evaluated in all seven areas. The final evaluation and recommendations should be presented in a written report and then explained and amplified in an oral report. The consultant's familiarity with the computer industry will be critical at this point, since vendor demonstrations only touch on many of these areas.

The next step is to narrow the field of vendors to the first and second choices and then proceed with negotiations. It is wise to identify at least two vendors so that the local government retains some leverage in the negotiation process.

Preparing and negotiating the contract

The contract is the most important document in the computer acquisition process. Vendors prefer to use a standard contract which is designed to protect the vendor's interest. County or city officials should prepare their own, thorough contract.

The contract has two functions: (1) to describe the job to be done and the associated costs, and (2) to explore the contingencies (what if's) involved. With the advice of their consultant, the local officials, staff, and legal counsel should make a list of any possible complications that they can foresee as they go through the computer acquisition process. These concerns can then be considered for inclusion in the contract.

Monitoring installation

After the contract has been negotiated and signed by both parties, the process of installation begins. The key to problem-free installation is the contract. The contract should specify each step to be completed, by whom, the amount of time allowed, and how the step is to be judged complete and acceptable. Once the process has been put into writing, the consultant's job is to see that both parties fulfill their respective responsibilities. Since the officials and staff will be unfamiliar with the installation process, the consultant should direct them as to what needs to be done and when. The vendor, on the other hand, has installed computer systems many times. Consequently, the consultant should serve as a watchdog to ensure the vendor's compliance with established procedures.

During the installation period, the consultant should make at least two follow-up visits to the county or city. One of these visits should coincide with system acceptance testing. The consultant's responsibility does not end until the computer system is operating satisfactorily and acceptance is complete.

¹Source: This paper was adapted from "Selecting and Purchasing a Computer for County Government," by Barbara Broeckelman, Charlie A. Burns, and Gerald A. Doeksen, *OSU Extension Facts*, No. 843, Cooperative Extension Service, Division of Agriculture, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

²Steps 3 through 7 follow a procedure developed by John Scoggins, Government Data Processing Associate, Institute of Government, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

³For a summary of major offices and officials in Texas county government, see "County Government in Texas", J.A. Gilmartin and J.M. Rothe, *County Government Topics*, Issue No. 2, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, V.G. Young Institute of County Government, L-2094.

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