

Report from Bridle to Bill Porter on selection of Greenwood Partnership to provide architect/engineering services for NRAO Edgemont Road Addition, May 3 1999

A committee appointed by U.Va. to select an architect/engineering firm for the Stone Hall Addition met on 3 May 1999 and unanimously recommended the Greenwood Partnership of Williamsburg, Va. as the firm with which U.Va. should now negotiate a contract for these services.

Five firms were interviewed on May 3 by a committee chaired by Pete Anderson, the University Architect. The other members of the committee were Bob Dillman and Don Riggan of U.Va. Facilities Management, and myself.

All five firms were well known in detail to all of the U.Va. participants. All made one-hour presentations outlining their firm's technical competency for the project, and presenting their understanding of the project goals and constraints, with varying levels of detail about how they would proceed (site issues, schematic designs, etc.) All five were then questioned at length by the committee.

Fees, rates, etc. were specifically excluded from the proposal process by U.Va. This was not a "lowest-bidder" competition. It was an attempt to determine which firm would be the best match to this contract.

Subject to the approval of the Board of Visitors, U.Va. will now try to negotiate a detailed contract with Greenwood. If that cannot be done satisfactorily, they will move on to the second-ranked firm, VMDO Architects of Charlottesville.

Some notes:

It was a real review. All four committee members commented afterwards that our views of the firms' suitability for this project had been strongly influenced by the interactions we had during these interviews.

No firm but Smith-Garrett wanted to build the "square-completion" scheme recommended by Smith-Garrett. Several gave good site and constructability reasons for not doing so, as well as reflecting some of our own concerns about the "separations" reflected in this scheme. So the only part of the plan to survive this meeting will be the project cost.

The Greenwood Partnership won the competition on several scores:

1. They clearly recognized that cost-effectiveness and minimum impact on the site were both important, and that they reinforced each other ... the less site excavation work to be done, the greater the proportion of the project budget that can go into the facilities.
2. They understood the need for a final building with a clear center that would eventually feel like "one facility".
3. They are a strongly engineering-oriented firm who had clearly listened in detail to what NRAO staff had told them about the project, and had then thought "outside the box" provided by the Smith-Garrett study. Their plan seemed likely to decrease the incidental project costs such as excavation and to maximize the unity of the final building.

4. While they have done some big projects in the past, they have not worked with U.Va. before. They are clearly keen to make a good impression and our project will be the main focus of this team. They demonstrated awareness of its needs and constraints and good rapport with the committee during questioning.

The concept proposed by Greenwood is to build a new wing on the flattest part of the property, towards the VDOT Research Center, at an angle to our present building. This new wing would join into an expanded lobby/library area, forming a large central "common area" in the style of the AOC. The main entrance would remain where it is, but would be made over to upgrade the overall appearance of the building. A key element of the proposal is that a separate service access to the CDL would be created at the VDOT end of our property; and U.Va. will have to negotiate this with VDOT. All of the "CDL wing" would be above-ground, so that nobody will work "in a basement". Much of this construction could be done without disturbing current access to our building, though there will be congestion and noise on the site however we proceed.

The other firms interviewed were:

RTKL Associates: a Baltimore-based megafirm of global scope, \$1 billion projects completed last year. Clearly the most technically qualified team, they demonstrated almost total insensitivity to the actual goals of the project, confirming the fears raised by their paper proposal that this was too small and insignificant a project to get quality attention from them. My guess is that they wanted to keep their "C'ville team" together to work on the next big U.Va. project. They had clearly got some of their concept of what we should be doing by talking to people at Johns Hopkins, not to us. They came in with three badly thought-out plans that met very few of our actual requirements but would have cost a bundle. While ranked #1 in technical proficiency from their paper proposal, we mostly ranked them #5 after an extremely poor interview.

Shriver and Holland Associates of Norfolk, Va.: last year did projects worth \$115,965,000. Unlike RTKL, they had listened to NRAO input, but came up with an awful plan and seemed very disorganized. It was not clear to us that they really wanted to do this project.

VMDO Architects, Charlottesville: Clearly the more technically competent of the two local firms, they proposed a design that surrounded the present library and would require expensive excavations. Their presentation emphasized form over function, but their engineering team is very much stronger than Smith-Garrett's. We felt that they could be steered into doing the "right" project for us, and would in fact be preferable to Smith-Garrett, who did the feasibility study, if U.Va. cannot negotiate satisfactorily with Greenwood.

Smith-Garrett, Charlottesville, VA: Given the enormous advantage they had from doing the design study, their proposal was very weak. U.Va. shared the NRAO impression that this company might be out of its depth in doing a project with as many constraints as ours. They ended up third-ranked, with strong misgivings about actually awarding them the contract.

Next steps:

The committee believes that it is very likely that Greenwood will come to terms with U.Va. if the BOV approves our choice on May 15, 1999.

We should prepare for an intensive few months of design discussions with them.

There could be some disadvantages to working with a firm headquartered in Williamsburg, but these may well be mitigated by this company's approach. They learned a lot about us in a short time, and also made it part of their proposal to set up a password-protected website so that we could directly review their project drawings and status documentation at any time. They had a highly appropriate sense of urgency and concern with cost-effectiveness, but we will have to do some thinking "outside the box" ourselves in the near future to interact well with them.