

Council ponders next move on project

BY CAROL COMEGNO • COURIER-POST STAFF • MAY 18, 2010

MOORESTOWN — Township council expressed disappointment Monday in the performance of the project team that admitted underestimating the reconstruction cost of town hall and designing more expensive mechanical, electrical and structural systems that drove up bid prices.

No decision was made by council Monday night to immediately redesign and rebid the project, but the mayor indicated council needs to consider whether it should change the project team of architect Kitchen & Associates and project management consultant Greyhawk.

Last week, council rejected all 10 construction bids for town hall, library and police complex on Second Avenue after the lowest bid came in 35 percent higher — \$15.7 million — than the initial construction estimate of \$11.6 million.

"The quality of cost estimates relative to design were way off. Kitchen, we are disappointed with what you sold us compared to what we got," Mayor Daniel Roccato said at a meeting in the existing library building, which council intended to replace as part of a two-building town hall project.

He told an audience of residents, including non-unionized general contractors, that council will have to evaluate if the two professional firms are the "right team" and that the entire project may have to be "recast."

He also said it has become increasingly obvious that the team's recommendation to limit the bidding to union contractors and subcontractors was a "bad call."

Both in a written report and verbally at the meeting, consultant Ronald C. Kerins Jr. of Greyhawk admitted his firm did not tell council the cost estimate had risen in February to \$15.5 million (later whittled down to \$13 million) and that the

team made a decision to proceed with bidding because of the pressure to get it to market now to get the most competitive prices.

Kerins said the decision to rebuild and renovate on the concrete slab of the existing town hall partially contributed to the higher cost. Other factors were a mezzanine to house the heating, ventilating and air conditioning equipment, high-end lighting, rigid steel piping instead of flexible cable to house electrical wiring and not bidding audio-visual equipment as a separate contract.

In the report, Kerins wrote that the desire to get the package on the street and Kitchen's "lack of confidence in Greyhawk's estimate" forced the project to continue to the bidding phase.



Moorestown leaders were unhappy with the bids received for the proposed town hall project (above). (Rendering provided)

"Instead of pursuing bidding, Greyhawk should have proposed the project be held for "some aggressive redesign efforts," he admitted. "We are committed as a team to address this situation head on at our collective own expense and get this project out for bid as soon as reasonably possible."

Four non-union general contractors who live in Moorestown said at the meeting the labor agreement in the bid specifications increased the cost of the job. They all rebutted Greyhawk's contention that construction prices generally are rising.

Contractors Crag Alper and Kirby Wu disagreed with Kerin's contention that the labor agreement for union contractors was not a major factor in the higher prices bid and that construction bids are going up.

Alper, chairman of the Association of Builders and Contractors, said a state Department of Labor study of school construction concluded the labor agreement contracts are 32 percent higher than bids submitted by non-unionized contractors. They still have to pay the prevailing wage for tradesmen and can opt to hire union labor.

"I think you guys have done a horrible job," contractor George Williams told the project team. "Personally, if it (council) were me, I'd fire you."

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