

# Right-Sized Requests: Best Practices for Writing RFPs for Infrastructure Planning Services

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# Right-Sized Requests: Best Practices for Writing Infrastructure Planning RFPs for Gateway Communities

By: Luke Thompson, PE, HDR Inc.

Born and raised in Denver, Colorado, I was fortunate to spend my childhood exploring the state's rich natural landscapes and the broader western region. That spirit of exploration expanded in scale when a few high school friends and I brought our everyday adventures to Montana at the start of our college years. Bozeman offered countless opportunities to connect with nearby wilderness areas and National Parks, deepening my appreciation for the outdoors and the communities that make access possible. After moving from Montana to Arizona, I now call Seattle, Washington home.

As I've moved through the West—both personally and professionally—I've had the privilege of working alongside small communities to improve water and wastewater infrastructure. Through these experiences, I've developed a deep respect and affection for our gateway communities. These towns are more than stopovers—they're the

foundation for so many of the memories and experiences we hold dear. Their hospitality, infrastructure, and character shape our interactions with the natural world, making it all the more important to support their growth and resilience.

Despite serving as essential hubs for recreational access, gateway communities often face unique challenges. Many lack the funding, management capacity, or broader planning context needed to navigate rapid population growth, shifting policy landscapes, or economies of scale beyond their control. Upgrading infrastructure or working effectively with consultants can feel overwhelming, especially when stretched thin across competing priorities. With that in mind, I wanted to reflect on some of the best infrastructure planning practices I've encountered—insights that may be useful as gateway communities adapt and grow. This guide is meant to provide a set of different lenses through which to evaluate infrastructure planning—helping communities understand what to look for and how far into the woods to look. My hope is that it supports thoughtful, sustainable decision-making that maintains the vitality of these special places and preserves the experiences they make possible.

## Introduction to the RFP Guide:

A common requirement of improving water infrastructure involves a preliminary engineering study that defines the infrastructure improvements that will be needed to accommodate existing and future populations. Recently, these studies are taking on an increasingly comprehensive “integrated planning” approach, which broadens the scope to include affordability, infrastructure equity analyses, and wholistic engineering solutions.

Usually, integrated plans and engineering studies are conducted by an engineering consultant who submitted a response to a community's “request for proposals”, or RFP, where an engineering firm highlights how their services and expertise are able to meet the proposal's requirements. The community then determines the most qualified engineering firm for the job, and collaborates with them to accomplish the task in question.

**Generally, community RFPs are for projects that seek to do the following (in order of priority):**

1

### Step 1

Evaluate, define, and quantify infrastructure capacity and condition and affordability and infrastructure equity challenges.

[Click to download a .pdf with all categories >](#)

2

## Step 2

Plan, project, and estimate the impact on infrastructure and inequities by population growth and increased tourism.

3

## Step 3

Quantify, prioritize, and optimize the cost, effort, and schedule of improvements for present and future conditions

To accomplish these goals, costs can vary widely based on quantity and quality of information required or desired by a community. This is why an adaptable and tiered scope of services is preferable, and what this guide hopes to provide to community leaders drafting RFPs. To visualize the range of infrastructure planning services available to communities and their general cost, let's use an Olympic analogy for a three-tiered system: **Bronze, silver, or gold.** **Bronze** services will represent the minimum requirements to get the information needed to make better-informed infrastructure planning decisions. **Silver** and **Gold** services will add to the bronze and/or silver levels to highlight more comprehensive service options. Knowing what services are available will allow communities to determine if the additional effort or cost is worth it, or, if future studies should be pursued when more funding is available or attainable.

**Bronze, silver, or gold text color for each "service level" is depicted for each of the primary categories of infrastructure planning listed below:**

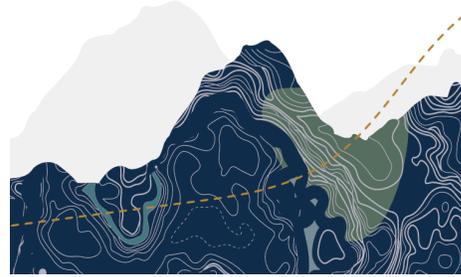
1. **Population Growth and Community Planning**
2. **Data Acquisition and Infrastructure Inventory and Assessment**
3. **Infrastructure Alternatives Analysis and Recommendation**
4. **Cost Estimating, Phasing, and Funding Support**

Learn more about the service level for each category of infrastructure planning by clicking through the images below. **You can also download a .pdf with all the categories at the end of this post!**

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**Luke Thompson** is an avid outdoor enthusiast and licensed professional engineer with six years of experience working in gateway communities across the American West. As an associate and wastewater engineer at HDR, he partners with communities of all sizes to develop sustainable water infrastructure solutions. Beyond his professional work, Luke donates his time and expertise through Engineers Without Borders USA, contributing to infrastructure projects both locally and internationally and serving on the organization's Board of Directors. When he's not working, he's exploring the world's natural wonders with his wife and their two energetic cattle dogs.