

# Buying Playground Equipment: The “Request for Proposal” (RFP)

How you make a purchase decision is a critical factor in your ultimate satisfaction with the product you choose. And the more complex or costly the item you’re buying, the more important it is to have a process that helps you reach the best decision for your community.

Today’s play equipment, and especially the continuous-play playstructure, is a good example of a product that requires a well-considered purchasing approach.

## ***Bidding may not be the best solution.***

The most common buying process used today is the formal bid. This method works well with bulk materials, supplies and other commodity items. However, it ignores important variables (and may lead to unpleasant surprises) when used for complex purchases such as playstructures.

### *An example illustrates this point:*

■ Wood playstructures are almost always less expensive to buy than metal structures. However, they typically have a shorter lifespan, are expensive to maintain and have higher long-term liability risks. For these reasons, a playground designer might feel that a wood playstructure doesn’t represent the best value for the taxpayers—yet the school or park may be required to accept it if a formal bidding process is used.

A more flexible purchasing approach, and more comprehensive, is the *Request for Proposal*, or RFP. This method recognizes the fact that playstructures are not commodities, and that price or “low bid” alone may not reflect the equipment’s true life cost.



*“Today’s play equipment requires a well-considered purchasing approach.”*

The RFP process is appropriate when any of these factors apply:

- You want your evaluation to consider quality, safety, longevity and compliance with current standards and guidelines—in short, you want to get the best *long-term* value for the community.
- Price is not the only variable, or you don’t want to be forced to purchase the lowest bid.
- You’re seeking a novel solution (i.e., a custom playstructure rather than an off-the-shelf design).
- You’re short-staffed, or your staff lacks design experience.
- You’d like to involve the community in making important decisions about the playground.

In this *PlayGuide Bulletin*, we’ll focus on the RFP purchasing approach for two reasons: (1) many readers aren’t familiar with it; and (2) it often results in a better purchase decision.

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*“With an invitation for bid, the buying agency has the burden of deciding the pieces of equipment and laying out the play area, and the agency may not have the expertise necessary to get the job done right. With an RFP, the burden of design can be placed on the supplier. The supplier can be asked to determine the safest design, including surface. The supplier provides professional help to make an area that is much more useful and better for the kids.”*

D’Arcy Roper *Manager of Technical Services*  
National Institute of Governmental Purchasing



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## ***RFP can be easier and less expensive.***

The RFP process differs from a formal bid in several important ways:

- *You can put the design and specifications burden on the supplier.* The supplier is presented with a list of design and budget criteria. The supplier must then develop a proposal that meets those requirements while complying with CPSC, ASTM and ADA design guidelines and equipment specifications. The end result is a greater number of design options from which to choose.
- *Supplier expertise can be leveraged.* The leading manufacturers and their representatives have years of experience in working with groups like yours. Because the RFP is a flexible and open evaluation process, it lets you draw on such suppliers' professional expertise.
- *You can encourage outside input.* Because the specification is relatively open at the beginning of the RFP process, there's an opportunity to solicit ideas from your professional staff and the community. Obtaining this input *before* offering the RFP assures that suppliers will know all the concerns they should address.
- *Ability to meet incumbent specifications can be considered.* Matching or complementing existing equipment can be a significant factor for existing play areas, if your plans call for adding equipment.
- *Suppliers can be compared.* Manufacturers and their local representatives can be judged qualitatively on the basis of experience, reputation, past performance, insurance coverage, etc.

## ***An RFP can be formal or informal.***

A Request for Proposal isn't just a list of requirements—it's a *purchasing management tool* that can be used to make the best buying decision when dealing with a blend of objective and subjective factors.

An RFP can be as simple a statement as, "Provide a playstructure with approximately 15 elements for children from ages 5-12, at a cost not to exceed \$40,000." Or it can be a formal document that resembles an invitation for bidding.

If you choose the formal approach, we suggest including these basic elements in your RFP:

### **1. Table of contents**

Help the supplier navigate through the RFP with an outline of the document.

### **2. General requirements**

- *Scope of services.* This is a basic summary of what you expect from the supplier: products, design services, meetings, installation role, etc.
- *Budget.* State the maximum funds available and whether "phasing" (spreading the capital expenditure over several years) is an option.
- *Preparation of the proposal.* Explain what the supplier should include in the presentation. Photos and opportunities for site visits can be valuable additions to the written proposal.
- *Drawings.* Do you want 2D site drawings, three-dimensional renderings, or both?
- *Samples.* What kinds of equipment and material samples are required?
- *Bid bond,* if required.

### **3. Technical specifications**

- *Equipment design.* Don't be so specific that you limit your options. The supplier may have ideas that could result in a better or more cost-efficient playground.
- *Play value.* Define the ages of the children who'll be using your equipment and what types of play are most important.
- *Materials.* Emphasize quality, but keep your choices open. For example, specifying "metal" will eliminate wood, and vice versa. If you'd like recycled materials in your structure, be sure to indicate this.
- *Supplier Warranties:* A suppliers' warranty is one factor in determining the quality of products.

### **4. Business specifications**

- *Background information.* Ask about supplier qualifications, their experience with similar projects, their philosophy of play, etc.
- *Warranty.* Indicate that the supplier must provide a warranty in writing on each item (and on installation, if needed).
- *Insurance.* Is the supplier expected to have liability insurance to cover defects in equipment design, manufacture and installation?
- *References.* Indicate how many references you need, and in what form they should be submitted.

■ *Training.* What professional certification or training do you require of the manufacturer’s design department, local representative, installation crew, etc.?

■ *Manufacturer certification.* Do you require or assign value to ISO 9001, IPEMA and other certifications by independent standards organizations?

**5. General instructions**

■ *Deadlines.* When is the proposal due?

■ *Decision.* How and when will the decision be made and announced?

■ *Copies.* The number of copies, and who should receive them.

■ *Contact information,* in case the suppliers have questions.

■ *How to submit deviations,* in case your plans or the supplier’s change after the initial proposal is tendered.

***Good procedures mean better decisions.***

Fairness is always a concern when subjectivity becomes part of the decision making process. Involving as many people as you can—including the community, when possible—will prevent accusations of “favoritism.”

A numerically weighted “decision matrix” can also help by applying mathematical analysis to a qualitative decision-making process.

The accompanying table shows a matrix or “point system” which was developed for a specific playground. The matrix assigned relative levels of importance to nine different factors in the categories of aesthetics, durability, play value and cost.

During the evaluation process, the landscape architect and the city used a scoresheet to rate the competing manufacturers and their equipment. The resulting scores made it easy to see which suppliers came closest to meeting the city’s objectives.

You may choose to emphasize different performance factors. Or you may feel that a point system is most appropriate for creating a “short list” of suppliers rather than being used at the final decisionmaking stage. The important thing is to establish a procedure and adhere to it throughout the process. This will result in a better decision, and it will provide supporting evidence if you’re later asked to back your decision with hard data.

***To ensure quality, allow enough time.***

Timing is another thing to consider. Because the RFP process requires more work of the suppliers, you should allow time for the suppliers to create design concepts, drawings and other presentation materials—just as you’d need to allow time for in-house design work if you were soliciting formal bids.

**SAMPLE** Playground Equipment Analysis “Point System”

Type of Play Equipment	Aesthetics 20%			Durability 30%			Play Value 35%				Cost 15%			TOTAL 100%
	Color Choice	Deck Material	Total	Warranty	Maintenance	Total	Variety	Creativity	Challenge	Total	Materials	Installation	Total	
Manufacturer 1	10	10	10.00	10	10	10.00	10	7	9	8.67	10	8	9.00	<b>9.38</b>
Manufacturer 2	10	9	9.50	9	10	9.50	8	7	7	7.33	10	8	9.00	<b>8.67</b>
Manufacturer 3	10	9	9.50	8	10	9.00	8	7	9	8.00	9	8	8.50	<b>8.68</b>
Manufacturer 4	7	9	8.00	8	7	7.50	10	10	9	9.67	9	8	8.50	<b>8.51</b>
Manufacturer 5	10	9	9.50	7	10	8.50	8	7	7	7.33	9	8	8.50	<b>8.29</b>

Developed by Craig Ewing, Director of Community Development for the City of LaCañada Flintridge, and Swire Siegel Landscape Architects. (Used with permission.)

## ***Involving the community***

Many communities have discovered the value of soliciting input from parents, children, professionals, such as park staff or teachers, and local organizations during the playground design and selection process. In some cases, community involvement may include fundraising and helping with site preparation and installation chores.

Such involvement often leads to more successful playgrounds, fewer problems with vandalism and a reduction in taxpayer complaints.

*Your Landscape Structures representative can supply you with the following materials to help you plan and solicit community involvement:*



***Playground Planning Guide***, a 12-page brochure that explains the critical steps of planning a great playground.



***Community-Built Playgrounds***, from the PLAYGUIDE™ Bulletin series.



*“The biggest problem with the bidding process is that the low bid is not always the best choice. Accepting the lowest bidder has sometimes been a problem for us. Unless you can prove that what you’re buying is unsafe or does not meet specifications, you’re forced to accept something you don’t really want simply because it’s the lowest bid.”*

*“The RFP process is definitely easier for the internal staff. We may only have to specify the age group, the area to put the playstructure in and maybe some budget parameters. Then the supplier comes back to us with types of play activities, materials and costs. The advantage to us as a customer is that we’re not locking ourselves into any given design or approach.”*

**Jim Luger** Operations Coordinator/Park Planner  
Washington County, Minnesota

### ***FOR MORE INFORMATION:***

For more suggestions on the RFP process, or for design assistance with a new or renovated playground, call your local Landscape Structures representative.



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