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FEBRUARY 2009

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[Analysis]

How Public School Bus Fleets Can Save Money, Procurement Time and Budgets

By Steve Perlstein

Cooperative procurements, once known as "piggybacking," have skyrocketed in recent years for many reasons. It is a method whereby a single government agency has gone through the bid process, established a contract for an item or group of items and issued an award or awards to several vendors. Other state agencies can then utilize these co-ops.

Reasons for the growth in cooperative procurement include group buying power, shrinking procurement staffs and not needing to write specs for every single purchase. As one state procurement director said before his state joined a large co-op, "Why re-invent the wheel when another state and their procurement staff has done all of the work?"

To use an example and to focus on the equipment required to maintain school bus fleets, there are several opportunities to participate in cooperative procurement for garage equipment. The first cooperative we'll discuss on a state level is the Western State Contracting Alliance, commonly known as WSCA. The WSCA contract titled "Vehicle Lifts and Related Garage Equipment" is being used by 22 different states, with Michigan being the latest addition. When a state joins WSCA, every city, county or other state agency can use it. The WSCA terms and conditions are clearly spelled out, and the contract itself has a mandate for guaranteed lowest government pricing.

Kathie Collins, the contracting officer

for the WSCA vehicle lift contract, said vehicle lift contracts are one of the fastest growing WSCA contracts based on the number of states that have joined. It is also a contract that has far exceeded the anticipated purchases.

All WSCA contracts are competitive-bid, multi-year contracts with multiple vendors for a variety of equipment offered on these multiple award schedule (MAS) contracts. Research of the equipment listed on the vehicle lift contract shows there are four brands of lifts offered by multiple vendors. In addition to vehicle lifts of all types and sizes, the contract offers wheel balancers, tire changers, alignment and exhaust evacuation equipment.

Vendor Web sites are listed at www.govlifts.com. It is

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a requirement of the contract that each of the vendors establish and maintain a Web site with specific product lists and government net discount pricing. Vendor sites show specific state contract, terms, conditions and net discounted and delivered government pricing.

While General Services Administration serves the needs of every federal agency, contracts from the Houston-Galveston Area Council (HGAC), the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) and the Baltimore Regional Cooperative Purchasing Committee (BRCPC) serve the needs of all city, county and school agencies across the United States. As a government to government co-op, these contracts are also multi-sourced to include many vendors,

all with the guaranteed lowest government pricing, including freight costs, and a fully disclosed set of terms and conditions of the specific contracts. Much like the WSCA co-op offers vehicle lifts and related shop equipment, the HGAC (www.hgacbuy.org) co-op offers vehicle lifts and a full array of fleet service equipment as well as school buses.

HGAC has 2,700 government agencies in 27 different states, the latest being all agencies located in Mississippi, which also recently signed on to WSCA. Meanwhile, MARC and BRCPC are regional cooperatives. For a government agency to join HGAC, membership is free and never expires. Cooperative procurement is such a quickly growing practice among government agencies that HGAC's membership has doubled over the last two years. Besides vehicle lifts and fleet service equipment, HGAC offers all types of public works equipment, trucks, cars, ambulances and municipal maintenance equipment. A phone interview with the fleet manager for the City of Alvin, Texas, shows he was able to buy choice garage equipment, legally avoid the cumbersome process of writing bid specifications and purchase the lifts he planned to have in his shop versus the typical low bid offering, which did not suit his agency's requirements. A city agency in Pennsylvania was also able to buy a crack sealing machine at a cost savings of more than \$6,000 over the low bid received from a local vendor.

HGAC's Ron Williamson is in charge of establishing new contract members. To join, an Interlocal contract form is submitted, and within 48 hours the submitting government agency receives its own membership number to view the HGAC Web site that displays available products and prices. HGAC contracts are convenience of use contracts. In addition, they serve as a barometer for a purchasing department to verify the purchase order they are issuing is the best price available for taxpayer dollars. Work hours can be saved by using the HGAC co-op because HGAC is the one reviewing bids and the many "soft costs" of a public procurement.

The last type of cooperative procurement is using another agency's contract.

Procurement statutes in all 50 states allow a city, county or state agency to use another state's established contractor or to use a GSA contract as a basis of an award. Recently, the Delaware Department of Transportation purchased mobile column lifts by using the federal GSA price as a benchmark and issued a purchase order to a lift vendor.

Cooperative procurement is growing fast.

lowers overall procurement costs, is legal in all 50 states and gets the agency necessary equipment without the need of spending a lot of time writing specs for a low-bid price. As that state purchasing director said, "Why reinvent the wheel?" ■

Perlstein is sales and marketing manager for Mohawk Lifts. He can be contacted at sperlstein@mohawklifts.com.

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