In late November, staff sent out a Request for Proposal (RFP) for website development services. We received twenty-one submissions from across the country. The website committee, consisting of representatives from all departments of the Village, reviewed the RFP responses based upon each firm’s background, experience with municipal websites, staffing, and design ability. As cost is somewhat flexible, it was not considered one of the primary rating criteria when reviewing these firms. Of the twenty-one firms that responded, the top three firms were asked to make a presentation before the committee on February 4. These firms were Americaneagle.com, CivicPlus, and Vision Internet. All three firms were of the highest caliber and have developed well over 1,000 municipal websites between them.

Americaneagle.com

In the last fifteen years, Americaneagle.com has worked with approximately 300 municipal clients. The company is headquartered in Park Ridge. Recently, the company has redesigned the websites for the Villages of Deerfield, Wilmette, Arlington Heights, and Palatine. Currently they are working with several other communities in the area, including Park Ridge. Their proposal answered all of the requirements laid out in the Village’s RFP and addressed areas of weakness in our current site. Americaneagle.com provided several options for growth including integration with Village databases (i.e., accounting and e-payments), staff intranet, user contribution tools, and multilingual translation. The staff at Americaneagle.com is highly qualified and has worked with a myriad of municipalities.

Their presentation was very well done and highlighted their versatile abilities. Americaneagle.com not only services municipal clients, but also major sports teams, various Federal Government departments (including the White House’s official website), and a variety of retailers and e-commerce sites. Their capabilities would provide the Village with a myriad of options to utilize email list serves, social networking, multi-media applications, and other modern web features. Web design is one of their strengths, and their team is top notch. However, their content management system, or CMS, which is used to update the website, was thought to be complex and not especially intuitive.
CivicPlus

For more than a decade, CivicPlus has been working with government organizations to improve their website capabilities. During this time, the company has worked with over 500 municipalities. CivicPlus is headquartered in Kansas but has an additional office location in Joliet. The company has developed the websites for the Villages of Buffalo Grove, Lombard, and Winfield and the City of Elmhurst. The proposal answered all of the requirements from the Village’s RFP and presented options for growth, including interactive forms and surveys, a request tracker system, e-commerce, and clickable maps.

Their presentation was informative and detailed. CivicPlus has a very dynamic design team that has developed a variety of sites, but their style was considered somewhat “cookie cutter” by the committee. Many of their applications are excellent and provide a number of options for the Village, including interactivity with social networking, and their CMS is highly intuitive and seemed to be easy to use. All in all, while they are certainly one of the largest firms catering to municipal clients, the committee was not convinced that they were the proper fit for Northbrook’s needs at this time.

Vision Internet

Vision Internet has been working with municipal clients for over thirteen years. Though the corporate office is located in California, they have a Midwest office in Kansas. Their work spans across thirty-five states, including Illinois. Recently, they launched the Village of Hoffman Estates’ new website, and they are currently working on sites for the Villages of Barrington, Elk Grove, and Mount Prospect. Mt. Prospect’s new site is scheduled to launch in the spring. Their proposal answered all the requirements laid out by the Village and included options for growth, including multilingual translation, social networking, interactive forms, and online billing. The staff selected to be on the project team are highly qualified and have previous experience with municipal sites. A training manual based on the developed site would be produced by the company.

Vision’s presentation highlighted the firm’s excellent design and site construction capabilities. Their designs were considered some of the most dramatic, yet functional, of the three firms that were interviewed. Their applications were, like their competitors’, very dynamic and exciting. Most impressive, however, was their exceptionally intuitive and easy-to-use CMS, easily the best of the three that staff saw in the presentations. Overall, Vision Internet seemed to have the best balance of design capability and site functionality.

Conclusion/Recommendation

All three firms that presented on February 4 were top-notch experts in municipal website development. As a result, the committee’s decision was more difficult, as all three had the capabilities to undertake this project. The committee reviewed the options presented and debated on the merits of each firm and their offerings, basing its recommendation on their abilities to develop the best site for the Village. One of our primary guides in making our selection hinged on the firm’s ability to design the best site and offer the best architecture and content
management options to the Village. Without one or the other, the site will not serve
the community as effectively as a site that balances design and structure equally.
Therefore, after review of the three top firms’ proposals and presentations, staff
recommends that the Communications and Legislation Committee authorize staff to
negotiate a contract agreement with Vision Internet for full Board review and
approval.

Vision Internet had the best mix of qualifications that the committee was
looking for, and their references were all positive. In their presentation, it was
evident that they had a clear understanding of the needs of government in an
electronic age. Their applications, from interactivity with social networking and
right-sizing websites for mobile devices to their text translation, online forms, and
bill-pay capabilities, seemed most appropriate for the Village’s new website. Also,
given that the website will be one of the most visible of the Village’s many public
faces, top-notch design credentials are vital, an area where Vision Internet excels.

In speaking with colleagues at the Villages of Mt. Prospect and Hoffman
Estates, their experiences have been very positive, highlighting the staff’s abilities
to ensure that their needs were met, their design capabilities and credentials (in
fact referring to them as “world class”), and their attention to detail.

Staff is very positive about the abilities of this firm and looks forward to
discussing their credentials further with the Communications and Legislation
Committee on February 9, 2010.