



Providing Affordable High-Speed Internet Throughout Boulder, Colorado

As part of Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities initiative, the Government Performance Lab (GPL) provided pro-bono technical assistance to the City of Boulder to procure for the construction of a large-scale broadband fiber network to improve high-speed internet access, particularly for low-income communities. Through this procurement, project partners developed a set of results-driven contracting tools that could be applied more broadly to improve outcomes from the city's contracted services.

The Challenge: Across the City of Boulder, reliable, affordable and high-speed (broadband) internet connections were not universally available. In the city's less affluent neighborhoods, private internet service providers had underprovided broadband infrastructure, limiting access to reliable and high-speed internet. Disparities in internet access have implications for economic opportunity (for example, through access to digital employment, health, and educational resources), and disproportionately affect lower-income communities of color. To address this, the City of Boulder set out to contract a fiber construction services firm to build 65 miles of fiber optic infrastructure.

In setting out to conduct this large procurement, the city had specific equity goals it hoped to accomplish throughout all stages of the process:

1. **Equity in vendor selection:** the city wanted the procurement to be accessible for women and minority-owned business enterprises (WMBEs) to submit proposals.
2. **Equity in construction standards:** the city aimed to hold vendors accountable to consistent standards of high performance and timely construction in their work across neighborhoods. It was important that certain low-income neighborhoods were not disproportionately affected by the construction work.
3. **Equity in project outcomes:** as a result of this procurement, the city wanted all neighborhoods, regardless of affluence, to have access to affordable and high-speed internet connection.

The City of Boulder sought to strategically leverage the fiber construction procurement to accomplish these equity goals. In doing so, the city also aimed to create a set of tools that could help address more systemic procurement challenges. For example, procurement quality varied greatly across city departments (due to decentralized procurement practices), the city rarely measured performance in contracts (and when they did, it was on an ad-hoc basis), and there was often very little vendor engagement to notify potential respondents of upcoming opportunities and encourage a diverse pool of applicants. Building tools and developing strategies to address these persistent challenges through a more results-driven approach to procurement could help the city improve outcomes for Boulder residents across a range of key services.

The Project: With support from the GPL, the City of Boulder released a results-driven procurement and set out a model for using procurement more strategically in the future. In particular, project partners:

1. Released a results-driven request for bids (RFB) for 65 miles of fiber network construction to improve broadband equity across the city

With support from the GPL, stakeholders from Boulder’s Innovation and Technology Department, City Manager’s Office, Public Works Department, City Attorney’s Office, and Purchasing Division worked together to develop a [new RFB](#) for a fiber construction services firm to build 65 miles of fiber backbone and laterals to improve broadband access in the city’s low-income neighborhoods. With a focus on achieving their equity goals, the city altered their procurement process from business as usual in a few key ways:

- **Hosted a pre-solicitation conference:** The city held a pre-solicitation conference to clarify any vendor questions and help encourage high-quality responses from a range of potential contractors, including WMBEs. (See the box below for more details.)
- **Articulated explicit outcome goals and performance management expectations:** The RFB strongly incentivized timely and high-quality service delivery by setting clear goals, technical standards, and execution timelines. It also articulated an approach to performance measurement and contract management that required regular collaboration between the contractor and the city. This included a plan for reporting data on timeliness of completion of key stages of work, including clean-up, to ensure that all communities received a high-level of service.
- **Set standards for community engagement:** The RFB provided explicit direction and expectations for vendor engagement with communities, including: proactive communication to communities to indicate forthcoming and ongoing construction activities, responsiveness to community concerns about construction site locations, strict observance requirements of city regulations on hours of activity, and strategies to minimize disruption to pedestrian and vehicle traffic.

Pre-solicitation conference to engage community members, communicate RFB goals, and increase vendor diversity

Prior to releasing the RFB, the City of Boulder hosted a pre-solicitation conference to share information about the upcoming opportunity to help improve broadband access across the city. The conference aimed to generate interest in the RFB as well as connect interested prime contractors with small or WMBE sub-contractors. The city also took this opportunity to communicate their goals for the contract, particularly around maintaining high-quality services across communities and not disrupting neighborhoods disproportionately. Advertising efforts targeted at industry groups that represent “underserved businesses” led to strong attendance at the pre-solicitation conference, with nearly 70 unique attendees.

2. Built capacity of Boulder city staff to apply results-driven contracting strategies more broadly through the creation of an accessible resource library

Based on the results-driven strategies used for the broadband procurement, project partners developed a results-driven contracting library so that city staff could apply these techniques more broadly across the city’s contracted services. The library included the following tools and resources:

- **Request for Bid template:** This template was created to serve as a one-stop resource for guiding department staff to define the problem their procurement aims to solve, articulate clear contract goals, develop a scope of work that invites innovation, and outline a contract management approach that uses real-time data to monitor and

improve performance over the life of the contract. Each section of the template embedded guidance on how to apply results-driven contracting strategies in drafting the RFB language.

- Results-driven contracting worksheets and activity facilitation guide: Worksheets were designed for department staff looking for deeper guidance and exercises that could help them develop specific sections of their solicitation. For example, if department staff had developed a strong RFB but were looking for new or more structured ways to evaluate proposals, they could consult the worksheet dedicated to “Evaluation Criteria and Scoring Approach.”
- Scoring matrix template: This template was created to help department staff provide detailed guidance to members of a RFB evaluation committee about what factors to consider when scoring proposals. The template allowed for easy synthesis of multiple scores and comments from evaluation committee members to inform final award recommendation discussions.
- Vendor performance assessment form: This form was developed to provide example metrics to standardize tracking of vendor performance across contracts.

In addition to the resource library, project partners began to develop system-wide strategies for using procurement more strategically as a lever to achieve programmatic outcome goals. For example, the city has been working to develop strategies to improve equity in contracting across services, with a focus on collecting better data on the volume of contracting that it does with underserved businesses to ultimately inform spending goals with those businesses. The city has also been working on a proposal for systematically capturing data related to procurement and contracts across the city. This would include capturing data related to equity goals as described above, but also general data collection on the number of procurements per department, dollar amounts of each procurement, when contracts are set to expire, etc. Developing this data system could help equip the city to use procurement more strategically going forward.

The Results: While it is still early after the release of the broadband RFB, project partners have:

1. Made progress towards equitably providing broadband access across the City of Boulder

The City of Boulder has been working to comprehensively provide broadband access to low-income areas, in order to increase access to reliable and high-speed internet. By releasing an RFB and selecting vendors to build 65 miles of fiber network construction, the city has made progress towards their equity goals across all stages of the process:

- Equity in vendor selection: The winning bid was \$8m below the city’s project budget of \$19m and included 18 proposed sub-contractors, 13 of which were underserved businesses (including small and women or minority-owned business enterprises).
- Equity in construction standards: Features of the released RFB improved the probability that the construction work proceeds in a timely fashion and that there is minimal community disruption across all areas.
- Equity in project outcomes: The high-quality public fiber infrastructure created through the fiber construction contract will advance the city’s goals of ensuring equitable access to broadband speed internet across the city.

2. Developed a new set of results-driven procurement tools that can be applied more broadly to the city's high-priority contracts

The city has piloted several strategies for results-driven contracting that can be adapted and applied to future procurements, such as articulating clear problem statements and goals, creating performance metrics that track progress towards the department's vision of success, and planning for regular reviews of performance data and collaboration with vendors. The city also tested new ways of communicating with vendors about the upcoming bid, collaborating across city departments to develop key sections of the RFB, and managing the proposal selection process. To help ensure these strategies are used in the future, the city drafted its first ever Purchasing Policy Manual to direct departments to results-driven contracting resources as they develop procurements for high-priority services. Approaches included in the manual for developing RFB content and managing the procurement process could be replicated on future procurements to drive improvements in service delivery that in turn improve outcomes for Boulder residents.

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