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Procurement That Turns Pilots Into Programs

By Stephen Goldsmith

Had I started a large procurement on my first day as deputy mayor of New York, it wouldn't have been completed for as long as twenty-four months, around the time I returned to Harvard. That delay frustrated me then, and it still frustrates mayors everywhere. But time is only part of the problem. Too often, local governments write procurements as if they already know the answer.

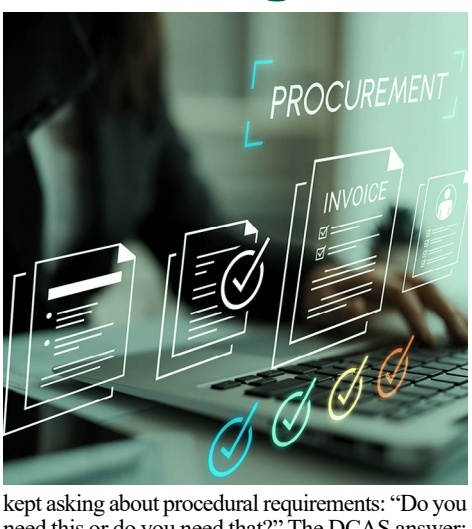
New York City now includes what are known as challenge-based procurements to address these problems. Instead of drafting an RFP that prescribes a product, the city publishes a challenge statement that defines the problem and the outcomes it needs. A traditional request for proposals, said Julia Fusfeld, who oversees procurement reform as a deputy director in the Mayor's Office of Contract Services (MOCS), tells the market, "This is everything that we need. How much does it cost? Thank you. Have a great day."

A challenge statement instead lets vendors propose how to get there. The city pilots the most promising ideas in small, time-limited demonstrations. If a solution performs in the real world, it expands it without restarting the procurement cycle from scratch.

Yet, even successful pilots often go nowhere because when one ends, an agency still has to reprocure it competitively. It's frustrating for everyone involved, notes Fusfeld, whose job involves producing innovation inside the department. She summed up the city's message to vendors: "You can work with us for a couple years, we'll try your thing out, and if we like it, you still have to spend all this time and money to compete to get a contract with us longer term." Not surprisingly, when the city's Economic Development Corporation talked with tech firms, it heard that the city seemed "incredibly difficult to sell to," as Fusfeld put it.

Three lessons stand out for making this whole process work better for both the city and its vendors:

First, clearly state the problem to be solved. New York's first technology-focused challenge, issued by the Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS), described the problem the city faced and left the answer to vendors. At the vendor information session, Fusfeld recalled, companies



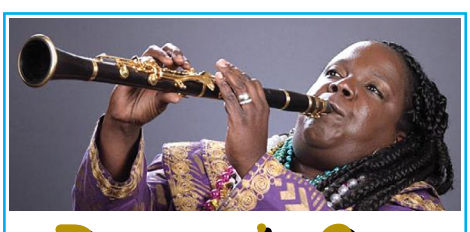
kept asking about procedural requirements: "Do you need this or do you need that?" The DCAS answer: "You tell us what your product does and how it might work with the city's operations." She said the format sits closer to a request for information, though

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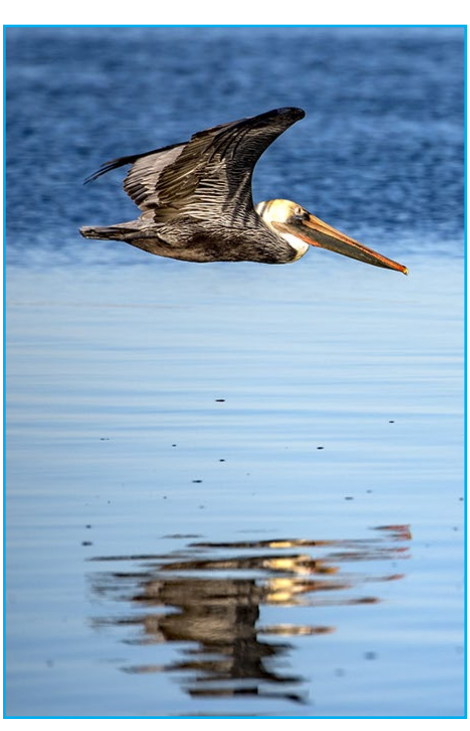


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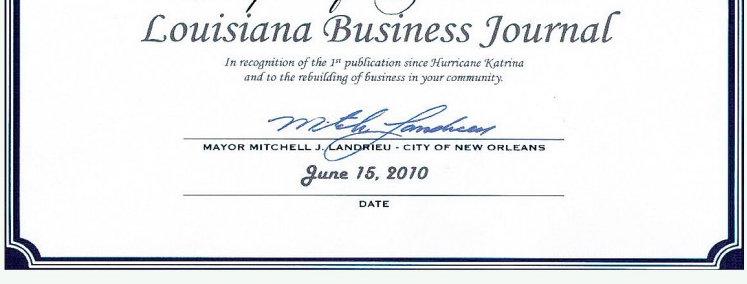
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Online
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration, Arkansas District Office
Contact: Suzanne Terrazas, 501-324-7379, Arkansas_DO@sba.gov
Fee: Free; registration required
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Understanding SBA Programs Webinar
Tuesday, November 17, 2026, 1:00 pm–2:00 pm CST
Online
Main Sponsor(s): US Small Business Administration, Houston District Office
Contact: Elizabeth Charles, 713-773-6505, elizabeth.charles@sba.gov
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Tuesday, December 8, 2026, 11:00 am–12:30 pm CST
Online
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Contact: Irene Gonzalez, 208-334-1673, irene.gonzalez@sba.gov
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