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Architects battling for projects

Local groups are vying with national firms for even small jobs.

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When Olmos Park's economic development corporation recently went shopping for a firm to develop a master plan for its eclectic commercial corridor, board members weren't sure who might throw their hat in the ring.

In the world of planning and design, a one-mile corridor for a city of 2,300 residents — even if it is upscale and urban — isn't normally considered a highly coveted contract.

But in a tough economy, smaller jobs become bigger deals and San Antonio firms are finding themselves compet-

ing against larger national companies that are desperate for work.

Olmos Park ended up with 18 proposals from planners and architects around the country, many with national and international reputations.

Although the Olmos Park City Council hasn't voted, the EDC is recommending a team that includes California-based Sargent Town Planning and locally based Michael Imber Architects.

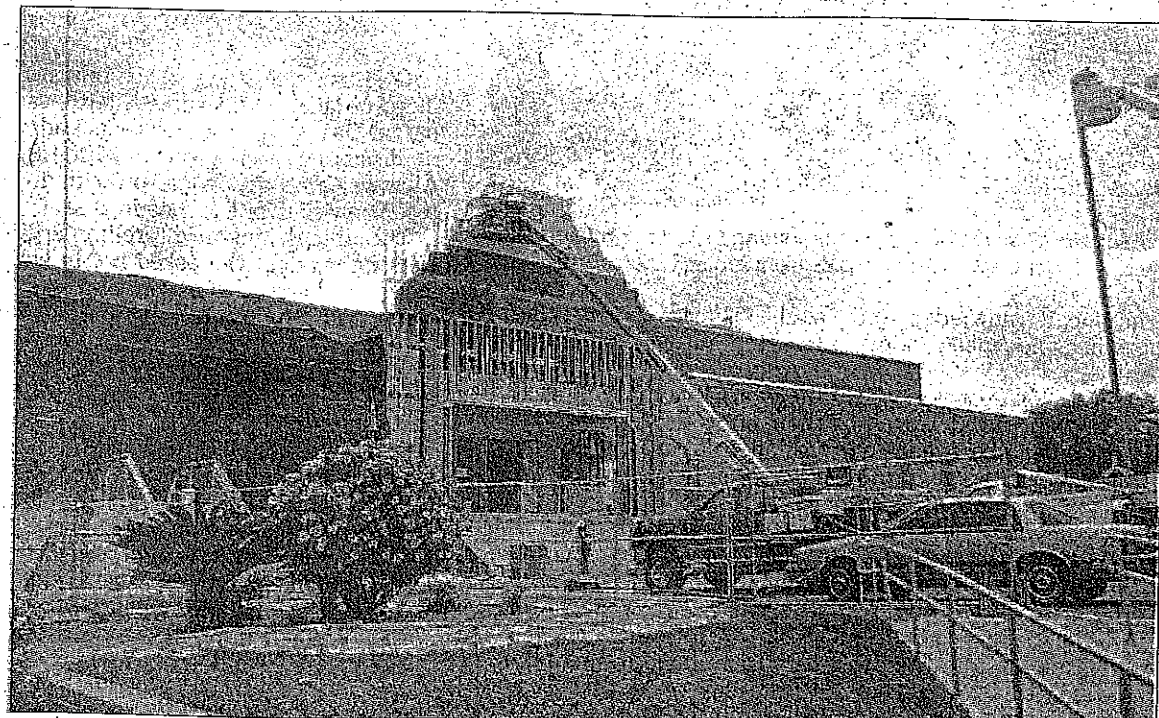
"We were really excited about the quality and quantity of responses," said Patrick Shearer, a board member and

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Competition is fierce among architecture firms for projects, even limited ones like the commercial corridor along McCullough Avenue in Olmos Park.



COURTESY PHOTO

The entrance that will lead into the marketplace at Wonderland of the Americas at Loop 410 and Interstate 10. Construction crews recently were updating the facade of the mall formerly called Crossroads of San Antonio.

ARCHITECTS

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principal of Cambridge Realty Group. "It's really world-class kind of talent."

With commercial markets not yet improving much, public work such as Olmos Park's is virtually the only kind happening.

"There are fewer jobs and a lot of architects looking for work," said Bob Wise, president of the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

A recent request for proposal that went out for a Midtown master plan got 19 responses from firms as far away as Boston; Portland, Ore.; and Pennsylvania, said Suzanne Scott, general manager of the San Antonio River Authority.

The budget will be around \$310,000.

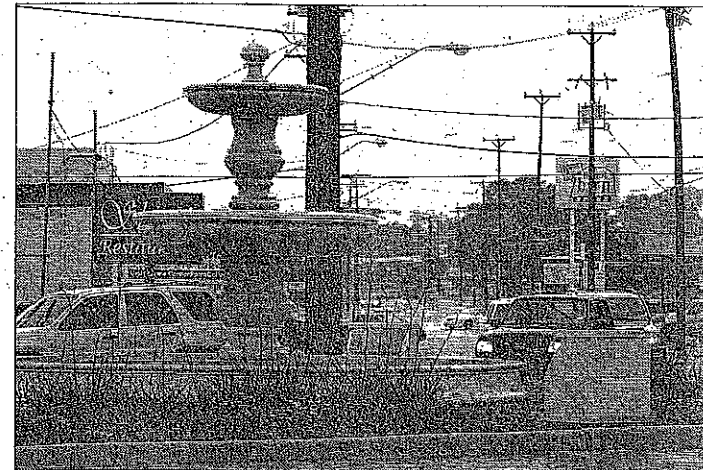
"It's a significant piece of work, but some of the planning efforts that we've seen in their submittals are much, much more significant," Scott said.

Similarly, the river authority is seeing huge interest from construction firms planning to bid on work for the South Reach of the San Antonio River.

"It's great for public projects," Scott said.

But at a time when architecture firms are cutting back staff, should being local count?

While it's difficult for a public entity to overtly favor local talent, Scott said out-of-state firms have to take travel costs into their budget considerations and often need the partnership with a local firm to make a project work financially.



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A call for bids to redesign this corridor along McCullough Avenue in Olmos Park generated 18 proposals from around the country.

And local knowledge and experience do mean some-

"We didn't say specifically there must be local teams," Scott said. "It was suggested that having someone familiar with local design, local culture and local engineering issues like flooding, would be a good idea, and would lead to a local firm being involved."

When Helotes hired a Colorado firm to do a master plan of its historic Old Town district, Ardie Garner, president of the economic development corporation, said the agency felt comfortable with the firm because of its team members from the San Antonio area.

"We knew their work and could see examples close by," Garner said.

Tom Rohde of Rohde Realty Corp. has a few commercial real estate projects in the works, and therefore a slew of architects and engineers courting him.

"I'm having people call me here in San Antonio that I've never heard of before," he

said. "They're from Austin, Houston and Dallas."

And local architects say they are going all-out in their efforts to win projects.

Madeline Anz Slay said that when her firm is a finalist for a project, its proposal includes detailed ideas and designs — something architects normally guard closely — in an effort to stand out.

When the small architecture firm has pursued public work, Slay has found herself competing with huge firms that promise eight architects will work on one small project.

And when Slay goes after private development work, her firm is up against architects who have been laid off, are working from home and have no overhead.

"They can beat me on price all day long," Slay said. "The normal small business that is trying to get work and meet payroll is really stuck. Someone called me up and said, 'Madeline, can you design a horse barn?' I said, 'I'll design a dog house.' It's really a world gone mad."