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February 7, 2023

DECISION MEMORANDUM

TO: Council Members

FROM: Ann E. Gravatt
Director, Public Affairs

SUBJECT: Contract with Coates Kokes for strategic communications

PROPOSED ACTION:

Authorize the staff to contract with Coates Kokes for strategic communications services.

SIGNIFICANCE:

Fills a key vacancy on Public Affairs team and supports the Council in meeting an essential component of its statutory mission – to effectively inform and involve the public in the Council’s work.

BUDGETARY/ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Staff recommends authorization to contract in an amount not to exceed \$80,000 this fiscal year. The contract is for a monthly retainer of \$10,000 per month. This contract will begin on February 21, 2023 and terminate on September 30, 2023. Assuming the contracted services are as useful to the Council as we expect them to be, staff will likely return to the Council for approval to extend the contract into the next fiscal year.

BACKGROUND

The Council Public Affairs division had two retirements in 2022. Division Director Mark Walker and Public Information Officer John Harrison both left the Council in spring 2022. Ann Gravatt was hired in October as the new Division Director. This contract essentially fills the role of John Harrison's position.

The decision to pursue a contract instead of a full-time position was based on two factors:

1. A public affairs firm offers a deep bench of talent and a wide variety of services that will be useful to the Council, as the public affairs team updates its approach to better position the Council in today's evolving communications environment.
2. There is some budget uncertainty whether the Public Affairs division can sustain four full-time FTEs. While the Council works towards greater budget certainty, a contract provides flexibility.

The Council issued an RFP in November 2022 for a strategic communications firm. Eight firms submitted responses. The Public Affairs Director interviewed five of the firms, narrowed those to two finalists who also met with the Executive Director. Ultimately Coates Kokes was selected for the work.

Coates Kokes is just a bit older than the Council. The firm was founded in 1978 in Portland and today has 16 employees. They provide strategic communications, media relations, marketing, video production and a range of related services. The Council's work will be led by Senior Account Manager Kristen Lambert, with support from Public Relations Director Sue Van Brocklin and President Steve Kokes. They will also rely on a variety of other staff, such as their social media manager, to support the Council.

Coates Kokes has significant relevant experience. Their professionals have worked with BPA, the Energy Trust of Oregon and NEEA on energy efficiency and power generation issues. They have also worked for Northwest River Partners and the Pacific NW Waterways Association on the economic and environmental value of the region's hydro system. Recently they have also supported the Oregon Department of Transportation, working with the agency's technical engineers and executive leadership to adapt in complex communications situations.

The goal of their work will be to provide the Council with a comprehensive communications plan, and support the public affairs team in its work. In line with this goal, the RFP detailed a set of tasks and services that we will be asking the firm to provide to the Council:

- Manage the creation and implementation of a strategic, multi-faceted communications plan to build and strengthen the Council's reputation as a leader in power planning and fish and wildlife mitigation in the region.
- Partner with Council staff to synthesize complex issues into messaging and storytelling that resonates with multiple Council audiences, including the

Bonneville Power Administration, state and federal policymakers and agencies, tribes, the region's utilities, and public interest organizations, among others.

- Create proactive strategies and messages for website, digital newsletter, media relations, and social media.
- Ensure that the Council's work is real and relevant to the region through proactive storytelling.
- Develop relationships with key regional and industry media and drive media relations that are prioritized, focused, and proactive.
- Assist in responding to media calls and inquiries in a timely manner. Work with Council staff to identify best spokesperson for relevant issue.
- Thought leadership and executive communications. Create recommendations for opportunities for the Council to take a leadership role on key issues important to the industry and region.
- Write talking points, op-eds, and speeches for Council leadership and staff.
- Monitor news media and social media for regional and national industry trends that the Council's programs help support and create strategies and pitches aligned with those trends.
- Support public affairs staff in completing required annual report to Congress, among others.
- Review and evaluate effectiveness of communications efforts through key performance indicators.

Some version of this list of services and tasks will become the statement of work for the contract with Coates Kokes, assuming the Council authorizes us to contract with that firm for the strategic communications assistance.