Texas rejects faulty, delayed virus supplies

By Allie Morris
DALLAS MORNING NEWS

AUSTIN – In its mad dash to buy masks, gowns and other medical supplies to protect against the coronavirus, Texas is spending millions of dollars in no-bid deals and tapping vendors that have no history doing business with the state.

The results have been mixed, according to state payment records and court documents. A California-based fabric firm new to the medical supply business successfully delivered thousands of gowns on a plane chartered from China. But last month, the state rejected over 200,000 face masks from another vendor because they turned out to be faulty.

In one unusual arrangement, the state is relying on the Lower Colorado River Authority and the private Dell Foundation for creative financing for a large shipment of personal protective equipment from Asia.

As cases of coronavirus climbed, Texas, like many states, had to compete for scarce personal protective equipment in a turbulent market rife with soaring prices, hordes of vendors and tales of fraudsters across the country.

The Texas Division of Emergency Management says it has safeguards in place, such as paying vendors only after supplies arrive and are inspected for quality, a step government watchdogs endorse.

Since the pandemic began, the division has ordered over $1.1 billion worth of medical supplies, but has cancelled over half the deals because products never arrived or were defective, a spokesman said. The division has spent $200 million to date on personal protective equipment, which is being distributed statewide to health care workers and first responders.

"The primary goal has been to provide desperately needed PPE to health care workers and those who needed it to help stop the spread of COVID-19," TDEM spokesman Seth Christensen said in a statement. "In order to meet the need and to continue preparation for responding to COVID-19 moving forward, diversifying vendors was and still is a necessity, as no one vendor has been able to meet our increased demand for product."

Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

Registered nurse Erik Miller is sprayed with disinfectant by fellow nurse Krista Rozell after seeing a patient at Texas Emergency Care Center in Atascocita.

The state has paid 106 purchase orders for personal protective equipment, Christensen said. At least a dozen vendors the division used had no recent history doing business with the state, according to a review of payment records on the Texas Comptroller's website.

They include medical equipment suppliers, but also a defense contractor and a California-based fabric sourcing company that turned to medical gowns when the pandemic began. The company, ICU Production, chartered a plane to fly "a few hundred thousand" gowns to Texas from factories in China, said CEO Joseph Cohen.

"We just wanted to help with the supply chain," he said. "When the pandemic started, our overseas teams had access to the right factories."

Another vendor, South Carolina-based InFocus Healthcare Consultants, filed a lawsuit against its supplier last week. It alleges the supplier delivered 207,360 KN-95 masks to TDEM that did not meet federal standards. The state rejected the masks and they were sent back to the Illinois-based supplier, the lawsuit says. Neither company offered a comment on the lawsuit.

The pivot to unfamiliar vendors for PPE is not unique to Texas, said Michael Carome, director of the Health Research Group at the Washington D.C.-based advocacy group Public Citizen.

"Here we are in circumstances because of critical shortages and states looking for any possible supplier they are faced with these choices where they have to pick companies and they don't know whether they are reputable," he said.

TDEM found many vendors through an online portal it created early on in the pandemic that attracted over 4,600 submissions from companies looking to sell the state supplies, Christensen said.

To vet the vendors, the agency goes through a process to verify they can operate in Texas and to see whether they have done business in the past with other governmental entities, he said.

"This step gives our team insight into how familiar the vendor is with government procurement and payment processes," he said.

Online sex toy retailers capitalize on alone time

By Gabrielle Drolet
NEW YORK TIMES

Well, the data bears out what we expected. Sex toys are selling.

Adam and Eve, a company with franchised locations across North America and an online store, reported a 30 percent increase in online sales in March and April based on the same time period last year.

Other big companies that do most of their sales online also saw an uptick. Wow Tech Group, which owns We-Vibe and Womanizer, reported that online sales for both brands were more than 200 percent higher this April compared to last year.

And as Vice reported in April, online sales for products through Cotr Inc., the company behind B-Vibe, Le Wand and the Cowgirl, were roughly three times higher this March than they were last year. Alicia Sinclair, the chief executive, said that the numbers have continued to climb, with April's sales surpassing March's by 80 percent.

Some of this can be chalked up to lockdown boredom. (Also, during the height of stay-at-home orders, Amazon seems to have continued to ship sex toys, despite their nonessential status.)

But while big, corporate sex toy retailers seem to have thrived, the same cannot necessarily be said for brick-and-mortar sex shops. As consumers rush to buy sex toys from websites, businesses that usually rely on foot traffic and interpersonal connections with customers are suffering.

Sid Azmi, 37, the owner of Please, a store in Brooklyn that has been open for roughly six years, explained that despite having an accompanying online shop, she cannot compete with bigger online retailers.

Azmi said that small businesses often charge more for sex toys: They do not get bulk-buying discounts from distributors, and they cannot afford to have huge sales on their products. Customers are usually willing to pay more, she said, because of the friendly service and education stores like Please can offer.

"The reason why people come to us rather than buying from Amazon or bigger sex shops like Adam and Eve is because we offer in-house education, conversations, our time and our recommendations," she said. "It's that one-on-one personable service that we can't promote through online sales."

Nina Westervelt / New York Times

Online sales are spiking while brick-and-mortar stores like Babeland's in Brooklyn are struggling.

Shag, a store that features a collection of body-safe sex toys that has been in the Brooklyn borough of New York since 2009, is also feeling financial strain. Samantha Bard, 45, one of the store's owners, said that while online sales have risen slightly in the last two months, the store is selling far less than it would if the brick-and-mortar shop in Williamsburg was still open.

As a result, the owners have tried different tactics to succeed online: They have started selling locally made face masks; they have revamped their online store and added more products to it; they have even integrated with Amazon, so potential customers can find the store's products there.

"We're hoping that that will generate some people to come back after they've made their first Amazon purchase, maybe they'll come back to our own web store and purchase through us," Bard said.

In addition to single-location sex shops, established chains in New York are also hurting. Lisa Finn, a representative from Babeland – a chain with three of its four locations in New York City – said that, though online sales are higher, it is not enough to make up for how much the stores usually sell in person.

Glen Buzzetti, the CEO of Romantic Depot New York, said that since shifting to online-only, and offering same-day delivery, sales from the website have surged: Online sales in March and April were roughly 12 times higher than they were this time last year.

Yet it does not compare to how much the business, known for its massive, depot-style locations, usually sells from its physical stores.

"It's not enough to make a difference where it's going to be able to pay our rent," he said. "That's the reality: Our bills are higher than what is coming in."

Sex shops in other cities, further along than New York in easing restrictions, are still struggling to adapt to new, mostly online models.

Darling Way, in Houston, was able to open its doors to the public again on May 1. But Beth Liebling, 54, the owner and founder, said that the store is quieter now than it ever has been in its four-year history. The store's sales in May were 70 percent lower than what Liebling had projected in January.

"People aren't out and about very much," she said. "They just aren't in a big spending mood."

Serene Martinez, owner of Pink Bunny in San Francisco, said that it had been a generally positive experience. Though Pink Bunny has not been able to open its doors to the public yet because of California's restrictions, Martinez has been able to connect with customers through one-on-one Zoom calls and through the store's YouTube channel.

June Pilote, a sex educator, said that part of the reason boutique and smaller sex shops are struggling right now is because their prices are higher.

"Sex toys are something that can really help you explore your gender and your sexuality, but they're also expensive," he said.

He said that to avoid spending money on a product that is not right (it is usually not possible to return a used sex toy), people should take the time to research the toys they are buying.

Liebling emphasized that, though sales may be high for big online retailers, the next few months will be uncertain for business owners like herself.

"I don't think I'm the only one that's just looking around and going, 'Can we do this? Can we actually survive, financially?' "

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REQUEST FOR SUBCONTRACTOR/VENDOR PROPOSALS

University of Houston – Roy G. Cullen Building
University of Houston

Tellepsen is the CM@Risk for the University of Houston System – Roy G. Cullen Building. The project is located at the University of Houston Main Campus. The Roy Cullen building was built in 1939. This package is the 50% **CD GMP** Core Building Renovations.

Tellepsen Builders, L.P., as Construction Manager-at-Risk for the University of Houston System, in accordance with Texas Government Code 2269, will receive proposals from all qualified subcontractors and vendor trades for the project described above.

Proposals are due on Tuesday, July 14, 2020, at 2:00 p.m. local time. Please submit your proposal to bidtaker@tellepsen.com, fax to 281-931-4468 or mail/deliver it to Tellepsen Builders, L.P. at 777 Benmar, Suite 400, Houston, Texas 77060.

LATE PROPOSALS ARE NOT ACCEPTED.

A Non-Mandatory Pre-Proposal Conference is scheduled for Tuesday, June 23, 2020, @ 9:30 A.M. at UH Central Campus, General Services Building (GSB), 4211 Elgin St, Houston, TX 77002, Room, GSB 201. This will be a virtual meeting, details to be determined and issued as addendum.

All document review questions are due by 5:00 PM, Thursday, June 25, 2020. Please direct any questions to Rod Bowers at (281) 272-4905, or rbowers@tellepsen.com

It is the policy of University of Houston and Tellepsen Builders, L.P., to seek the involvement of Historically Underutilized Businesses (HUB) in its construction projects. The University of Houston and Tellepsen Builders, L.P., recognize probable subcontracting opportunities for Historically Underutilized Businesses in the proposal package. **HUB subcontracting plan (HSP) and certification forms, as required by the package documents, shall accompany each proposal that is submitted. Proposals submitted without all required information, and in the order and manner specified, may result in the proposal being considered non--responsive.**

The University of Houston System, the owner, reserves the right to waive any informality and/or to reject any or all proposals.

Drawings and specifications are available via invitation through SmartBidNet and can be viewed in the Tellepsen Builders office located at 777 Benmar, Suite 400 Houston, Texas 77060.

Contact Mercedes Lopez at 281-272-4939, or mlopez@tellepsen.com for bid invite for this project.

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KIPP Texas Public Schools, Inc. is seeking night cleaning services for four campuses located in Austin, starting August 1, 2020. Initial contract terms will be for two years with two one-year option terms. A Pre-Proposal Conference will be held virtually at website: https://bluejeans.com/254767213 or phone dial-in: (408) 419-1715; Meeting ID: 254 767 213 on June 15, 2020 at 10:00am CST. Proposals are due on June 22, 2020 on or before 11:00 AM CST. Proposals should be submitted electronically to Cyme.Abdul@KIPPTexas.org. Bids documents will be available at www.KIPPTexas.org/current-bids. Late proposals will not be evaluated. KIPP reserves the right to reject any or all proposals or waive any or all irregularities.

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NOTICE OF PUBLIC MEETING
MUNICIPAL SETTING DESIGNATION
CITY OF HOUSTON

Date – Time: July 15, 2020 – 6:00 PM
Place: Houston Permitting Center
Address: 1002 Washington Ave
Houston, TX 77002

Applicant: Grant Prideco, LP

Site Location: 6300 Navigation, Houston, Texas 77011

Legal Description: LTS 14 & 21; NEILS ESPERSON INDUSTRIAL DIST; LTS 15 16 19 20 & TR 18A; NEILS ESPERSON INDUSTRIAL DIST; TRS 30, 31, 31A, 32, 32A, 33A, 33B, 33C & 35; NEILS ESPERSON INDUSTRIAL DIST

Contaminants of Concern: Arsenic, Benzene

This designates an area in which the use of impaired groundwater is prohibited for use as potable water (i.e. drinking, cooking, bathing etc.). If you have questions or comments, please contact the City of Houston MSD Program at (832) 394-9003 or email at msd@houstontx.gov.

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REQUEST FOR COMPETITIVE SEALED PROPOSALS
2020 Matzke Road: Site Improvement Package
CYPRESS-FAIRBANKS INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT
Cypress-Fairbanks ISD Proposal No. 20-04-5471R-RFP
The Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District will accept Base Competitive Sealed Proposals until 2:00 P.M. on Thursday, July 16, 2020 at the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District Facilities and Construction Office, 11430-B Perry Road, Houston, Texas 77064 for the 2020 Matzke Road: Site Improvement Package project. A Pre-Proposal Conference will be held on Wednesday, June 24, 2020 at 10:00 A.M. at the above location. Proposal Evaluation Criteria are published in the "Instructions to Offerors" section of the proposal documents. Plans and specifications will be released after Monday, June 22, 2020, and are available to general contractors from the following address upon deposit of $150.00 per set and submittal of a fully executed Contractor's Qualification Statement, AIA Document A305 to: PBK Architects, Inc., 11 Greenway Plaza, 22nd Floor, Houston, Texas 77046, 713-965-0608. The Owner reserves the right to waive any informalities and to reject any or all proposals.

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Request for Quotes
RFQ 20-03
Reprographic Services

Harris County Housing Authority (HCHA) hereby solicits quotations from interested Offerors to provide Reprographic Services, for its central office at 1933 Hussion Street, Houston, TX 77003. **Proposals Due**: No later than 3:00 PM on Thursday, June 25, 2020. **Proposals shall be submitted to**: Harris County Housing Authority, P.O. Box 53028, Houston, TX 77052, Attn: Finance Department. RFQ 20-03 will be posted on and can be downloaded from HCHA's website www.hchatexas.org.

Sealed Proposal Solicitation #AV11-20
Houston-Galveston Area Council
Cooperative Purchasing Program
Statewide Automated Vehicle Procurement
Response Deadline: 6/30/20 @ 1pm
Public Opening: 6/30/20 @ 2pm
3555 Timmons Lane, Houston, TX.
Per ADA, reasonable accommodation provided with 24 hour prior notice.
713-499-6693 or www.hgacbuy.org for info.

The Academy of Accelerated Learning, Inc. (AAL) invites qualified General Contractors to submit a esponse to a Request for Proposal for Construction Management/General Contractor services (CMGC). AAL is seeking a skilled, professional, and dedicated firm for assistance in installing a modular classroom building. The selected firm will provide site improvements and flat work, entrance deck/ramps, skirting, utilities extensions and connections, and overall preparation for building placement (by others).

Proposal deadline is 2:00 pm on Monday, June 22, 2020.

NOTICE TO BIDDERS
The Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Texas (METRO) is planning to issue the procurement documents listed in this advertisement.
RFP No. 4020000148: METROLIFT Minivan Transportation Services. Solicitation will be available on or about 6/8/2020.
RFP No. 4020000163: For Signals and Communications. Solicitation will be available on or about 6/8/2020.
RFP No. 4020000164: For Traction Powers. Solicitation will be available on or about 6/8/2020.
RFTP No. 4020000165: For Track Maintenance Services. Solicitation will be available on or about 06/08/2020.
Prospective bidders/ proposers can view and download these solicitations by visiting METRO's website at https://www.ridemetroapp.org/procurement/
If you are unable to download the documents or are having difficulty, please contact METRO Plan and Bid Room at (713) 739-4881.

NOTICE TO BIDDERS
The Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Texas (METRO) is planning to issue the procurement documents listed in this advertisement.
IFB No. 4020000143: Purchase of Rail Line Pedestrian Collapsible Poles. Solicitation will be available on or about 6/16/2020.
Prospective bidders/ proposers can view and download these solicitations by visiting METRO's website at https://www.ridemetroapp.org/procurement/
If you are unable to download the documents or are having difficulty, please contact METRO Plan and Bid Room at (713) 739-4881.

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