Selling Out
San Francisco
How Private Contractors Inappropriately Manage City Services

Stefanie Portillo
Kristen Schumacher
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The City and County of San Francisco spends on average $5.2 billion each year on contracts, according to an SF Chronicle analysis.\(^1\) In fiscal year 2022-23 alone, the city awarded $7.1 billion in new contract agreements and on average has awarded $6.2 billion in new agreements yearly since 2017, reflecting the City’s increasing reliance on contractors.\(^2\)

A decade ago, the City and County invested 51% of its budget on city staffing expenditures and today that share has dropped to only 46%. Departments such as the Department of Public Works (DPW) and the SF Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) have experienced even more significant declines in their budget allocation to salary and benefits spending, dropping from 68% to 46% and 35% to 26% respectively.\(^3,4\)
These shifts in spending highlight a broader trend of prioritizing contracting out over in-house staffing, and now the City currently faces 3,747.77 total permanent vacant positions.

Notably, this increase in contract spending predominantly benefits contractors with no roots in San Francisco, with only 6% of awarded contract dollars going back to our local economy. Since 2017, $41 billion has been awarded to contractors outside San Francisco.\(^5\)

The City’s spending allocation, coupled with poor contractor outcomes, not only warrants scrutiny but also raises pertinent questions about the City’s fiscal priorities.

An examination of six contractors reveals several issues with how the City contracts out essential services, including administrative mismanagement, inability to meet contractual obligations, inappropriate monitoring practices, and inflated contractor prices compared to in-house services. Despite a record of costly mismanagement and subpar outcomes, all six contractors still maintain active contracts and continue to be awarded new agreements.

Because of how understaffed we’ve been, Public Works took to as-needed contractors to fill drafting services...and unfortunately some of these contractors don’t perform the work that they were hired to do and that has required full-time staff to go back and redo that work.

– Jamie Lee
San Francisco Public Works
Bureau of Architecture

3,747
Permanent vacant positions across the City & County of SF
It has also become increasingly evident that the City has opted for contractor services in lieu of recruiting essential and reliable staff even when fully funded vacancies exist and with complete disregard for the quality of contractor services.

A review of the 500 most recent contracting out requests made by City departments reveals that 1 in 10 contracts are requested due to understaffing. In these contract requests, departments explicitly cited lack of staff capacity, vacancies or the city’s long hiring timelines in their justification for the contract request.

The 500 requests surveyed cover only a snapshot in time from October 2022 to January of 2024, but even over this short time frame, understaffing motivated requests amounted to over $211 million in requested spending authority.

Although contract requests motivated by understaffing occurred across all departments, these requests were correlated with entities experiencing high amounts of vacant positions.

For instance, the Department of Public Health (DPH)—which has 600 vacant positions—requested over $100 million in contracting authority, the highest amount for any department. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)—which reported 600 vacant positions in early 2023—made the most individual requests with 21 requests that explicitly state that understaffing motivated the request, for a total of $9.7 million. The average value of an individual contract request due to lack of staff was $4.3 million.
Despite the continued use of contractors to address understaffing, the current plan for balancing the budget deficit includes only a small fraction of reductions to outside contractors—less than 6%—while over $21 million are cuts to vacant positions.

Unreliable contractors are costing the City, and more importantly taxpayers, valuable public funds when they misuse resources, fail to provide services that were paid for, and charge for unnecessary profits that could fully fund additional services.

The City’s continued unwillingness to invest in permanent staffing instead of private entities is actively costing taxpayers their right to effective and efficient city services.

Through our current system, funds that could be better spent investing in our local economy and funding essential services are knowingly wasted on private greed.

It is about time that we fixed our city.

“
I’d really like to see better oversight for what contractors do and their work. It’s expensive and problematic for our own people to follow up on something that should have been done properly in the first place.

– Calvin Chapman
Chemist at Sunol Valley Water Treatment Plant
Contractor Examples

Page 7  AECOM
Page 12  WSP USA
Page 14  Cross Country Staffing
Page 16  Heluna Health
Page 18  Urban Alchemy
Page 21  Nan McKay & Associates
According to the company’s filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), AECOM is the second largest general architecture and engineering design firm in the world. The company is headquartered in Dallas, Texas and has 52,000 employees, 18,000 of whom are located in the United States. The company also has corporate offices in Los Angeles, London, United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia and India.

In 2023, AECOM reported total revenues of $14 billion and $55.3 million in profit, down from $310.6 million in profit the year before. AECOM’s CEO compensation was $9.5 million including performance-based incentive pay. The executive team as a whole received over $21 million in compensation in 2022. In 2011, SFPUC awarded AECOM-Parsons Joint Venture a $150 million, 15-year contract for Program Management on the Sewer System Improvement Program (SSIP). The contract was intended to last between 2011 and 2026 but reached its spending limit around three years early in 2023. Based on a report conducted by the Budget and Legislative Analyst, inadequate long-term planning and mismanagement of task order costs and resources over the contract duration led to contract funds being exhausted early.
Annual performance evaluations for this contract had not been completed since 2018 despite Department policy, which staff state is due to lack of clarity around the procedure and constantly changing staff and leadership.\(^7\)

Under the same contract, SFPUC authorized more than $3 million in task orders unrelated to the SSIP, including services for the development and implementation of the Community Benefits Program and Social Impact Partnership Program.\(^8\)

An audit of the AECOM-Parsons Joint-Venture contract reveals there was no evidence that deliverables were reviewed despite contract language specifying deliverables must be submitted for review to SFPUC before being finalized. One task order was identified as having subpar deliverables leading to construction problems on certain SSIP projects. Moreover, task orders did not provide timelines for submitting deliverables and thus it could not be determined if deliverables were submitted on time.\(^9\)

SFPUC staff performed program controls and pre-construction management and planning work, which were originally under the AECOM-Parson Joint Venture contract and were transitioned in-house. Despite bringing work in-house that was originally supposed to be provided by AECOM-Parson contractors, the contract still reached its spending limit three years early.\(^10\)

Despite having knowledge of AECOM’s record of mismanaged task order costs and resources, inadequate long-term planning, and lack of proper contract monitoring, the City still awarded a $90,000,000, 10-year contract to AECOM Technical Services for Program Management Consulting services for the Wastewater Capital Plan Delivery.\(^11\)
Testimonial from Jonelle Gausman, a Junior Engineer for the City and an IFPTE Local 21 member, provides insight around the practice of contracting out services for improving the City’s sewer system.

In his testimonial, Gausman explains that contractors brought in to design the City’s sewer system lacked sufficient knowledge of the city to create adequate designs. The result, he states, is faulty designs that exacerbate flooding and create odor for residents daily. Although contractors provide the City with low bids, their faulty designs and infrastructure inevitably cost the City extra money to maintain and repair the system before the end of their normal life cycle. Gausman emphasizes that residents are left with a lower functioning city at a higher cost and in some cases are harmed by the deficiencies in the system.

Gausman’s testimonial coincides with a San Francisco Chronicle news article reporting that residents have been repeatedly harmed by floods tied to sewer system failures. In January 2023, the newspaper reported on the City’s decision to stop funding all repairs for flood damages caused by the limitation in the City’s sewer capacity. Instead, the City has opted to review property damages on a case-by-case basis, with no strategy to ensure consistent evaluations across all incidents. This decision meant homeowners and business owners may have to foot the bill for damages to their property despite the City acknowledging that its sewer system cannot handle large volumes of water during large storms.

In the article, the City Attorney’s spokesperson is cited saying, “just because the city’s infrastructure is pushed beyond its capacity by an extreme weather event, that does not mean that the city is responsible for the damage that results for that weather event.”

Private contractors don’t have the same investment as city employees and public agencies do. Their main motivation is profit

I’m a lifelong San Franciscan. I’d like to see a city that’s living up to its potential, and I think we do that through strengthening city workers as much as possible because this city is just not going to clean itself up.

– Jonelle Gausman
Junior Engineer in the Bureau of Engineering
SFPUC recovers all costs for contracts and capital plans—such as the SSIP project—through rates paid by consumers of the Wastewater Enterprise, including residents of the City and County of San Francisco. The 10-Year Capital Plan released by the department in 2023 reveals that the single largest driver of increased rates for customers of the Wastewater Enterprise are their capital plans. Over the next ten years, the total SFPUC operating budget dedicated to supporting capital expenditure is projected to rise from a third to a half of the operating budget, an increase largely driven by the SSIP project. It is unacceptable that the City expects residents to carry the burden of increased rates of 9% and 8% in the following years to fund capital projects managed by contractors with records of insanely high rates and unreliable management.

A Budget and Legislative Analyst report stated that annual contractor performance evaluations appears to be a division-wide problem for Wastewater Enterprise.

A breakdown of billing rates in the AECOM Wastewater Capital Plan Delivery contract with SFPUC reveals that contractors were being paid up to $300 per hour with multipliers as high as 3.05. The multiplier in this contract is in addition to the contractor’s hourly rate and accounts for the company’s desired profits and any overhead expenses.

Currently, the Department of Public Works (DPW) has thirteen active contracts with AECOM for As-Needed Environmental Contracting Services totaling $2 million in contract awards. DPW reports over 400 vacancies at a vacancy rate of 22%. In general, the City currently reports 153 vacant engineering positions and 49 vacant planning positions, the equivalent of an 18% and 16% vacancy rate respectively.
Employee costs for City and County of San Francisco include base salary as well as employer contributions to health care and pension.
Headquartered in Montreal Canada, WSP Global, Inc. is listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange and has more than 300 offices in the United States alone. The company has 68,000 employees across the globe and has aggressively expanded into local markets through acquisitions of smaller firms. In 2022 alone, the company spent over $1.8 billion on acquisitions. Also in 2022, the company reported $11.9 billion in revenue (Canadian Dollars) and over $434 million in profits.\(^{18}\)

A breakdown of billing rates in the $5 million WSP USA contract with SFMTA for As-Needed specialized consulting services reveals that contractors were being paid up to $301.02 per hour with multipliers as high as 3.14. Language in the contract allows WSP to charge the City a fixed fee of at most 7% of their estimated direct salaries and overhead costs for the sole purpose of making profit. In addition to this fixed fee, WSP is allowed to charge an additional fixed fee on subconsultant’s work of at most 3% of the subconsultant’s total labor charges.\(^{19}\)

Currently, SFMTA and DPW have seventeen active contracts with WSP USA totaling $9 billion in contract awards.\(^{20}\) Currently the SFMTA reports 234 vacant positions.
Employee costs for City and County of San Francisco include base salary as well as employer contributions to health care and pension.
Cross Country Healthcare, Inc is a publicly traded company headquartered in Boca Raton, Florida. It is one of the largest providers of healthcare staffing in the United States, according to the company’s filings with the SEC.

In 2022, the company reported $2.8 billion in revenues—a dramatic increase of 235% since 2020. Profits in 2022 were over $188 million. The company’s CEO was paid over $3.2 million in 2022, more than double their compensation of $1.28 million in the previous year. In total, Cross Country’s six top paid executives received over $10 million in 2022. The median employee of the firm was paid only $45,550.21

The City awarded Cross Country Staffing a $85 million, five-year, As-Needed Registry Personnel contract. The nursing services under this contract will cost taxpayers 14% more than had the services been provided in-house.
Providing in-house nursing services would have translated to around $1.8 million in cost-savings for a single year.

The Department of Public Health (DPH) sought to extend and increase the contract amount with Cross Country Staffing a year before its expiration when the department incurred expenditures that exceeded the original agreement amount. DPH admitted that it required assistance from the contractor due to registry staff vacancies, leaves of absence due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and additional staffing requirements due to COVID-19.\(^\text{22}\)

Since 2017, Cross Country Staffing has obtained $125 million in contract awards from DPH.\(^\text{23}\) Currently, the City has 134 vacant registered nurse positions, sufficient to make up for the 54 full time equivalent nurses that were contracted out through Cross Country Staffing.

**14%**

Increased cost of nursing services for SF taxpayers

**$18M**

Savings from providing nursing services in-house for a single year

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**Difference in Salary and Fringe Benefits**

*Budget and Legislative Analyst Contract Report, February 2022*

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Cross Country Staffing Registered Nurse</th>
<th>CCSF 2320 Registered Nurse</th>
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<td>Difference in Salary and Fringe Benefits</td>
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**Cost Difference of Using Contracted Services for 2020-2021**

*Budget and Legislative Analyst Contract Report, February 2022*

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<tr>
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<th>Cross Country Staffing Registered Nurse</th>
<th>CCSF 2320 Registered Nurse</th>
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<td>Cost Difference of Using Contracted Services for 2020-2021</td>
<td>$15,253,369</td>
<td>$13,368,440</td>
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Employee costs for City and County of San Francisco include base salary as well as employer contributions to health care and pension.
Heluna Health’s official name in tax filings is Public Health Foundation Enterprises, Inc, a non-profit organization headquartered in City of Industry, California. The organization has seen rapid growth in revenues in recent years, with 2022 revenues totaling $1.6 billion.

Heluna’s president and CEO Blayne Cutler was paid $569,057 in total compensation in 2022, including over $90,000 in bonus payments. Collectively, top executives received over $1.5 million in total compensation. The organization does not disclose its private donors in tax filings. In San Francisco alone, Heluna has received over $176 million in contract awards since 2017, $53 million of which were sole source or no-bid agreements.24

In a contract with the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH) for outreach and case management services, Heluna Health failed to meet its contractual obligation to maintain staffing levels above 90% for FY 2021-22, failed to write and implement a recruitment plan as stated in the FY 2021-22 monitoring report, and have struggled with frequent turnover since FY 2021-22.25
The contract monitoring report for FY 2022-23 revealed that Heluna Health failed again to maintain staffing levels of at least 90%, did not conduct required client satisfaction surveys, client charts were missing certificates of completion, reports were not submitted into CARBON (although they did submit quarterly reports on time via email), and did not have an Agency Disaster and Emergency Response Plan for its new location.26

HSH’s FY 2022-23 Fiscal and Compliance Monitoring of Heluna Health revealed that the contractor had 30 days of operating cash compared to the recommended best practice of 60 days.27

Currently the Department of Public Health reports over 600 vacancies, the highest number of any department. In April, the City reported around 271 vacancies in positions related to mental health, of which the City only managed to fill five vacant positions in the span of seven months.

600
Vacancies in the Department of Public Health

$569K
Compensation received by Helena’s president/CEO
Urban Alchemy initially began as part of a separate non-profit, Hunter’s Point Family. In the organization’s first independent tax filings in 2019, Urban Alchemy reported only $35,983 in total revenue. Just one year later, Urban Alchemy reported over $10 million in revenue, driven largely by no-bid contract awards from the City and County of San Francisco. Three years later in 2022, the organization’s revenues had risen to over $51 million.28

Since 2019, Urban Alchemy has received $78 million in total contract awards in San Francisco alone, $58 million of which have been no-bid agreements awarded under legislation passed in 2019, which waived the competitive process for contracts providing certain homelessness services.29 The organization’s co-founder Lena Miller has longstanding connections to both Mayor London Breed and Mohammed Nuru, whose non-profit organization the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners or SLUG was a fiscal sponsor of an earlier nonprofit founded by Miller.30 While whistleblower complaints were filed regarding the financial relationship of the two organizations, no wrong-doing was identified by the City Attorney’s Office due to inability to locate accounting records.31
In addition to public grants, Urban Alchemy also receives private donations but does not disclose its donors.

The Citywide Nonprofit Monitoring and Capacity Building report for FY 2021-22 found that Urban Alchemy did not conform with city standards, which measure a non-profit’s ability to meet standards in accounting and budgeting, financial statements, policy and operations, and governance. The Citywide Nonprofit Monitoring and Capacity Building report for FY 2022-23 showed that Urban Alchemy conformed with city standards. Despite these results, an analysis of the program’s dataset reveals that the standards Urban Alchemy was assessed on in FY 21-22—when the organization was found to be non-conformant—differed from those in FY 22-23. In fact, the FY 21-22 assessment included nineteen standards compared to the ten standards assessed in FY 22-23. Between both monitoring sessions, only five standards were assessed in both FY 21-22 and FY 22-23 and thus it is unclear if Urban Alchemy finally became compliant with the standards they did not meet in the previous fiscal year.

The Citywide Nonprofit Monitoring and Capacity Building dataset for FY 2022-23 revealed that Urban Alchemy was not in conformance with two recommended practices during the initial standard findings, including demonstrating annual cash flow projections and reporting at least 60 days of operating cash in their current audit. The final status of these standards shows that they were not applicable to Urban Alchemy’s monitoring assessment, and it is unclear why.
Employees can file wage claims against their employers with the Department of Industrial Relations (DIR) when they are not properly compensated with agreed upon wages and/or benefits. Between 2019 and 2024 Urban Alchemy received fourteen different wage claims, with the most recent claim being submitted on January 3rd, 2024. Public records also show eight Private Attorneys General Act (PAGA) complaints were filed against Urban Alchemy between 2020 and 2024, which authorizes employees to file lawsuits to recover civil penalties resulting from violations of the California labor code.

In 2020 and 2021, two separate complaints developed into class action lawsuits against Urban Alchemy, where plaintiffs alleged that the employer had failed to appropriately calculate overtime wages, failed to provide promised incentive compensations, failed to reimburse workers for business expenses, did not appropriately provide off-duty meal breaks, and did not appropriately provide rest periods in shifts ranging between five to ten hours. Urban Alchemy eventually reached a settlement of $980,000 for one of the lawsuits.

Urban Alchemy has obtained in total $78 million in contract awards from the city between 2019 and 2025, for services such as safety and de-escalation, street clean up, and shelter operations and support. Currently the City faces several vacancies in civil service classifications that perform similar functions as Urban Alchemy contracted positions. These positions include the 9166 Transit Ambassador that at the moment reports a 77.4% vacancy rate, the 7514 General Laborer with 98.15 vacant positions, and the Health Worker series with a total of 179 vacant positions.
Nan McKay & Associates, or NMA, is a San Diego headquartered company that has secured contracts across the US and Puerto Rico administering community development block grants and HUD funded programs.

The company is privately held and therefore does not report public data on revenues or profits. While little public data is available on the company’s financials, there are numerous records of legal issues across the United States with both the company’s performance and actions of its employees.

The company has also received an “F” rating from the Better Business Bureau, as it failed to reply to all complaints filed against it.\(^{42}\)

NMA was awarded a $32.4 million, three-year contract to manage the City’s Housing Authority Section 8 program.\(^{43}\)

NMA failed to meet the January 2020 deadline to submit reconciliation documents and misled the Authority to believe they would be completed on time. The documents were finalized about a year later in June 2021, resulting in $4.5 million in damages.\(^{44}\)
According to the lawsuit documents, NMA also failed to implement quality control systems, hire qualified staff for all positions, and implement a customer service system. Housing Authority personnel were instead used to fulfill tasks that NMA failed to complete. \(^\text{45}\)

Total damage is estimated to be around $6 to $10 million. \(^\text{46}\)

When the Housing Authority was transitioned to city oversight, direct services for voucher programs were completely privatized. 200 former staff of the Housing Authority were laid off and the City assumed technical oversight functions, including assistance in managing contract performance. Transition of the Housing Authority to a privatized model and the layoff of former staff was overseen by leadership reporting directly to the Mayor’s office.

“F”

Rating from Better Business Bureau

$10M

Minimum damages incurred by NMA
The City has attempted to put in place certain procedures for ensuring that spending on contractor services is invested back into the local economy including offering businesses certified as Local Business Enterprises (LBE) or large contractors using LBE’s for subcontracted work priority during their contract bidding process in what is known as LBE discounts. SFPUC’s Social Impact Partnership (SIP) Program offers similar advantages in the contract competitive bidding process to contractors who voluntarily commit to giving back to the community by offering financial contributions and/or volunteer hours to non-profit organizations and/or public education providers.

Although well intended, recent audits of both programs have revealed contractors repeatedly fail to deliver on promises to invest in our communities and the local economy.

In August 2023, the Controller’s Office released an audit report on contractors’ compliance with San Francisco Administrative Code regarding Chapter 14B, Local Business Enterprise (LBE) Utilization and Non-Discrimination in Contracting Ordinance. The audit randomly selected two joint ventures that were granted bid discounts and three contractors. The audit assessed whether they met their LBE participation commitments, submitted all required Contract Monitoring Division forms, and whether contracts were adequately monitored for LBE compliance.
The results of the assessment found that two of the three prime contractors and one of the two joint ventures did not fully comply with certain LBE provisions of the Administrative Code. The City identified issues regarding undisclosed non-LBE subconsultants, inability to provide sufficient evidence of LBE participation, and inability to submit required forms.48

In 2021, the Controller’s Office released an audit report examining SFPUC SIP program which revealed that roughly two-thirds of all contractor commitments made since 2011 were not fulfilled. Contractor commitments made since 2011 totaled $22 million, 82,000 person-hours, and nearly $1 million in in-kind services to support communities in SFPUC’s service area.49

SIP Commitments v. Contract Awards
Supplier Contracts Data SF and SFPUC SIP Dashboard, January 2024

0 - 2%
Contractors’ SIP commitments as percentage of the total contract award obtained
A field follow-up of the 2021 audit failed to disclose if two-thirds of missing commitments had been completely fulfilled and if there were consequences for contractors who failed to meet this contractual obligation.50

Further examination of SIP commitment and total contract awards of ten contractors (using data found in the SIP dashboard and the Supplier Contracts dataset) revealed that contractors’ SIP commitments were equivalent to 0%-2% of the total contract award obtained from the City. In one example, a contractor was granted a $32 million contract award yet only agreed to $60,000 in SIP commitments.51,52

This discovery shows that contractors only need to commit less than a fraction of their total contract award for social impact to gain points in the competitive bidding process, with no guarantee they will deliver.

“I’d like to see the City staff up and fill vacancies so that city employees are not short-staffed and we have the resources so that we don’t have to contract work out.”

– Sarah Young
Senior Information Systems Business Analyst, SFPUC
## Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AECOM Wastewater Capital Plan Delivery Contracted Positions</th>
<th>Direct Hourly Rate</th>
<th>Multiplier (Profit and Overhead Included)</th>
<th>Hourly Billing Rate (Max $300/hr for key/lead staff, $270/hr for all other staff)</th>
<th>Civil Service Classification</th>
<th>Direct Hourly Rate</th>
<th>Billing Hourly Rate (Fringe Benefits Included)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>5241 Engineer</td>
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<td>Electrical</td>
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<td>$270.00</td>
<td>5241 Engineer</td>
<td>$94.43</td>
<td>$120.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civil</td>
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<td>$260.31</td>
<td>5241 Engineer</td>
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<td>Principal Structural Engineer</td>
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## Appendix B

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<tr>
<th>WSP Contracted Positions</th>
<th>Direct Hourly Rate</th>
<th>Multiplier (Dependent on Office or Field Staff)</th>
<th>Hourly Billing Rate</th>
<th>Civil Service Classification</th>
<th>Direct Hourly Rate</th>
<th>Billing Hourly Rate (Fringe Benefits Included)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Senior Project Manager</td>
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<td>5508 Project Manager 4</td>
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<td>Project Manager</td>
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<td>Senior Electrical Engineer</td>
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<td>5211 Eng/Arch/Landscape Arch Senior</td>
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<td>Senior Structural Engineer</td>
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<td>1.4829</td>
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<td>5219 Senior Structural Engineer</td>
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<td>Survey Party Chief</td>
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