

Champion: MnDOT must embrace inclusion

Written by Amber English
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Community leaders and workforce advocates put the fire to the Minnesota Department of Transportation, demanding increased transparency and accountability in the departments' minority employment and contract awarding practices.

"How about seeing a few faces of color on these road projects as we drive around the metro area," William Means of Minnesota OIC said during testimony at a hearing before the Minnesota House of Representatives Transportation and Transit Policy Sub-Committee. Rev. Paul Slack of ISAIAH, Louis King of H.I.R.E. Minnesota, President of the Minnesota State Baptist Convention Rev. Jerry McAfee, Insight Owner and Editor Al McFarlane and Co-Chair of the Coalition of Black Churches/African-American Leadership Summit Bill English also testified before the committee.

The hearing followed MN/DOT's 2009 report to the Legislature concerning the department's progress in recruiting a diverse pool of employees and contractors. Federal regulations mandate that any project utilizing full or partial federal funds employs a percentage of minority and women workers and sub-contractors. MN/DOT's Office of Civil Rights sets the specific goals.

What the report revealed, however, was a staggering disparity between the goals set and the numbers achieved. But MN/DOT Director of Policy, Safety, and Strategic Initiatives Bernard Arsenau and director of MN/DOT's Office of Civil Rights, Hope Jensen assured Legislators and the public in attendance that the agency recognized their deficiencies and was working to improve upon them.

"I'm here to accept some responsibility for our progress and what we've done in the past in this area," Arsenau said before the sizeable crowd that turned out for the hearing. "It certainly isn't as good as we'd like to see."

The one project MN/DOT touts as a success—the 35W bridge reconstruction—was administered by an out-of-state contracting firm, Flatiron Construction Corporation. The Colorado-based firm exceeded its' 11 percent goal, achieving nearly 15 percent women and minority participation.

"We want to accept responsibility for that," Arsenau said. "But more importantly, we want to move forward with a program that will provide us with the foundation that's needed to work for both the minority community and the contractors."

With the recent passage of the Federal Economic Recovery Plan, more money will be pumped into MN/DOT projects—resulting in more jobs. The agency projects some 12,000 jobs will be available statewide on Economic Stimulus Projects—just over 7,000 of them in the metro area.

King, among others, wants to make sure that minorities are not shut out of those jobs as they have been in the past. H.I.R.E. Minnesota recommends the legislature require MN/DOT to establish 25% minority and female participation on stimulus project goals.

"We will not stand on the sidelines this construction season and see this money go away," King said.

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Until now, MN/DOT has admittedly spent less on programs designed to encourage increased hiring of women and minorities: the On the Job Training program, Roads Opportunities and Diversity Success Program, and the Transportation Opportunities Training Program. From 2007 to 2008, the agency spent only \$229,000 on these three programs that collectively served 430 people. Alternatively, MN/DOT's Graduate Engineer and Land Surveyor Program, designed to provide rotational work experience to graduate engineer trainees, had an operating budget of \$3.2 million according to the agency's report. Of the participants in that program, only 11 percent were women and 9 percent were minorities.

Rev. Jerry McAfee characterized the situation as "highway robbery", suggesting that the economic stimulus funds be withheld until MN/DOT improves its' programs and operations. Bill English, of the COBC/AALS, echoed those sentiments, threatening to bring U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar and Representatives Keith Ellison, MN-5, Betty McCollum, MN-4, and others into the fold by asking them to hold back the stimulus funds should MN/DOT fail to take steps toward transparency, meeting aggressive goals, and enforcing the laws currently on the books.

"Failure to act on [the committee's] part will require us to bring legal action against MN/DOT, to request the U.S. civil rights commission to investigate MN/DOT, and to use peaceful and nonviolent protest including shutting down infrastructure projects using bodies and vehicles if necessary, to bring public scrutiny to the failure of MN/DOT and its' major providers to guarantee equal opportunity and equal contracting opportunity to women and minority owned businesses in Minnesota," English said.

State Rep. Bobby Champion (DFL 58B), vice chair of the Transportation and Transit Policy sub-committee, expressed a commitment to work on improving this issue further.

"We want to make sure there's true investment in terms of training," Champion said. "We want to make sure the stimulus package does not come forward nor is implemented without there being clear vision in terms of inclusion."