

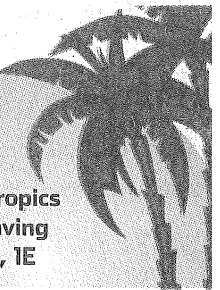
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Widening the workforce for a building boom

Building projects such as the light rail in St. Paul and the Union Depot have the potential to benefit communities of color if we develop a workforce that includes these individuals and helps us leverage the more than \$2.4 billion that will be spent on local infrastructure projects in the next few years. In addition to meeting long-standing but so far unmet minority hiring goals, this is an opportunity to provide a labor pool for the next decade as the region faces the exodus of the baby boomers.

While these opportunities are before us, history and economic conditions present a challenge. Historically, the development of infrastructure has meant that portions of the population – mainly minorities and poverty stricken individuals – are pushed to the side due to loss of homes and also denied the opportunity to participate in the building of that infrastructure. Such was the case when I-94 was built. We don't want to repeat that wrong.

In addition, the recent economic downturn has put St. Paul's community-based workforce system into a state of stress. The closing of East Metro OIC, the elimination of job placement programs at the St. Paul Urban League, and the elimination of construction training programs at Women Venture have left a void in St. Paul for individuals wanting to learn an employable skill. Without this training, disadvantaged women and minorities won't have access to jobs in their own communities, kids won't be able to see their parents go to work every day and the tax base and median income will decline.

Add to that the fact that St. Paul is under a mandate to improve the management of its Section 3 HUD programs to ensure low-income workforce and business utilization or lose \$18 million in funding, and you have what could be described as "a perfect storm" with the potential of causing the city and its residents a major setback.

Summit Academy OIC is prepared to help build the system that will produce the workforce necessary to face the challenges of tomorrow by taking advantage of the opportunities of today.

Since 1996, Summit Academy OIC has provided students with the skills needed to re-position their lives by learning a valuable trade in construction or health care, along with practical life-skills such as budgeting and financial self-discipline as well as the responsibilities of citizenship and parenthood. Simply put, we at Summit believe the best social service program in the world is a living-wage job.



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Summit is expanding into St. Paul with a plan to open a location on the East Side this fall. In the meantime, Summit is providing transportation to its Minneapolis location for St. Paul residents who are interested in enrolling in Summit's programs immediately. This expansion is based on requests from state and com-

munity leaders to help fill the void.

Summit is not alone in this venture. We have forged partnerships with a network of individuals and organizations including the East Side Neighborhood Development Company, the Chicano Latino Affairs Council, the Lao Family Community of Minnesota, New Hope Baptist Church, Progressive Baptist Church, Shiloh Baptist Church and the Asian American Press. Together we are educating community members about the benefits of learning life skills that will help them become gainfully employed in the future as well as get them on the right track.

In addition, we have ongoing partnerships with labor and companies that recognize our vision and support our training efforts. Organizations like Mortenson Construction, Tri-Construction, Thor Construction and Veit Construction have hired Summit graduates for a variety of projects, including the new TCF Stadium on the University of Minnesota campus, the Minnesota Twins stadium and the West Broadway Redevelopment Project.

Projects like the light rail in St. Paul and Union Depot have the potential to enhance the lives of community residents, particularly low-income individuals, if government officials and business leaders take the time to prepare them to participate in the process. The result – thriving communities, a growing base of taxpayers and the strengthening of families in neighborhoods where hope had all but diminished. It is a victory we all can share.

Louis King is CEO of Summit Academy OIC.