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## Diversity hiring a goal for MnDOT



Bruce Bisping, Star Tribune

Michael Shipman got a job with C.S. McCrossan Construction Co. after completing a training program at Summit Academy OIC that is part of MnDOT's effort to increase minority employment in construction.

Agency set standards, using federal funds to boost minority workforce.

By **ALEX EBERT**, Star Tribune

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After years of catching flak for having too few female and minority workers on highway projects, the Minnesota Department of Transportation, aided by an infusion of

federal money, has broken ground on some strategies that it says have already started inching it closer to its diversity goals.

Under heavy political and community pressure, MnDOT officials, in cooperation with contractors, unions, training institutions and community groups, imposed tougher rules and standards this summer to boost minority hiring and prepare more minorities for the construction workforce.

Contractors bidding on projects worth \$5 million or more must now include a plan for meeting diversity hiring goals on the project. By this winter contractors also will be required to let MnDOT scrutinize their payroll during the project to verify that minorities and women actually have meaningful jobs and hours.

Training programs skewed more toward minority recruitment as part of the collaborative have already sent at least eight students of color from unemployment to state construction sites as heavy equipment operators.

Michael Shipman's wife and four children watched him graduate in July from Minneapolis-based Summit Academy OIC, which joined with International Union of

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Operating Engineers Local 49 to offer the heavy equipment training he took -- the academic part at Summit's Minneapolis campus and the hands-on training at Local 49's Union Training Center in Hinckley.

"I actually was five minutes late getting to my graduation because I was getting off of work, but that's a good problem," said Shipman, who was hired days before by Maple Grove-based C.S. McCrossan.

"I feel like we've done a great deal of work," said Gary Lindblad, director of the Hinckley facility and one of the creators of the partnership. Instructors in Hinckley teach students to operate, flatten and dig with dozers, evacuators and Bobcats.

## Numbers improving

Tension over low numbers of minorities on state projects boiled over last summer. More than 200 people marched on MnDOT headquarters in July 2009, and protesters blocked Olson Highway one day the next month, prompting one arrest.

This March the federal government gave MnDOT \$900,000 in stimulus money to launch the training programs, the third largest of such grants the government

presented any state. MnDOT also pledged up to \$6.2 million in the next five years to make diversity hiring and contracting with disadvantaged businesses two of its "flagship" initiatives.

Mary Prescott, director of MnDOT's Office of Civil Rights, said the proportion of projects awarded to minority and women-owned businesses as subcontractors has increased from 4 percent in the fall of 2009 to 6 percent this spring, which is edging closer to the state goal of 8.75 percent.

The percentage of people of color working on MnDOT contracts statewide hovered around 6.4 percent from 1992 through 2009. Comparable statewide statistics for 2010 won't be available until next month.


However, state officials have figures for comparison on four metro area projects that spanned the 2009 and 2010 construction seasons. Last season those projects combined had a workforce that was 5.6 percent minorities and 3.7 percent women. This season, their combined workforce is 7.7 percent minorities and 4 percent women.

Also, MnDOT reports that the payroll for its federally funded "Highway Heavy" projects so far this fiscal year includes 87 trainees who

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are either people of color [61 of the total] or women [26 of the total], compared to 70 trainees who fit those categories last fiscal year.

MnDOT hiring goals call for 3 to 11 percent of a project's workforce to be people of color. Advocates say the higher number should be met, citing census reports showing that people of color were 14.3 percent of the state's population in 2007.

MnDOT recently awarded a total of \$550,000 in separate grants of various amounts to Summit Academy OIC, Merrick Community Services and the Minneapolis Urban League to create more training programs aimed at putting more highly skilled women and workers of color on union rosters and state projects.

But despite progress, employment levels for those groups are still far below the MnDOT goals, said Louis King, HIRE Minnesota co-chair and CEO of Summit Academy OIC.

This is "democracy in progress," King said. "It can be a daunting task. But for its flaws, I think [the collaborative is] a good alternative to lawsuits, protests and people all reaching for the red button."

Conflicting interests among the partners have heated some discussions; for example, they've argued over whether diversity goals are too high, and unions have complained that too many minority workers have been let go after government on-the-job-training reimbursements have run out.

"If we continue to do things the way we always had, we won't get results," said Emma Corrie, MnDOT workforce and business development project manager. "We have been having some very tough conversations, and when the tough conversations happen you make progress."

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