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Open houses showcase jobs to be had with Central Corridor light-rail project

Central Corridor project to employ about 800

By Frederick Melo
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The recession that hammered hiring in most fields has amounted to a depression in the construction industry, leaving countless laborers desperate for a chance to get back to work.

For at least 800 folks, that chance may be just around the corner.

Two open houses this week will showcase jobs to be had at the largest public works project in Minnesota history. The events, which are being hosted by different organizations, will focus on the Central Corridor light-rail transit project, a future rail line between downtown St. Paul and downtown Minneapolis.

The 11-mile line is expected to be up and running in 2014, and its construction will bring a dose of temporary employment relief by employing 800 construction and management workers each year.

First comes the training. A Construction Skills Expo and student recruitment event will be hosted today by Summit Academy, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization that provides job training for adults from economically depressed neighborhoods.

Union representatives will make presentations from 10 a.m. to noon geared toward those interested in becoming heavy equipment operators, cement masons, electricians and carpenters. Training sessions last 20 weeks and include 10 weeks of classroom time and 10 weeks of hands-on learning at the academy and union facilities.

Lisa Bergerson, a marketing manager with Summit Academy, said the group is working with the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Metropolitan

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Council to meet goals in diversity hiring. The Central Corridor line is the biggest opportunity around, but it isn't the only one, she said. While private industry is lagging, public works projects such as highway and bridge and other "horizontal" construction continue, fueled in part by federal stimulus funding.

"The construction industry, and especially horizontal construction, is picking up, and there are going to be jobs out there," Bergerson said. "Everybody is working together to make sure these goals can be met. ... But to do that, there need to be women and minorities trained to do the work, and skillfully trained."

Prospective students must arrive by 10 a.m. to participate. The event will be at the organization's offices, 935 Olson Memorial Highway, Minneapolis. Call 612-377-0150 or go to www.saoic.org for more information.

On Friday, the Met Council is organizing a job and job-training expo at the offices of Local 110 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, 1330 Conway St. in St. Paul. The Construction Career Expo will run from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., and workers will be able to

enter their names into the new CCLRTWorks database to receive e-mail notifications about job opportunities.

The database can be accessed at www.metro.council.org/transportation/ccorridor/CCLRTWorks/ CCLRTWorks.asp.

The mixer of sorts, which is hosted by the Met Council, Ramsey County and JobConnect, is set up like a job fair but geared toward people who are not currently in a union. They'll have a chance to meet contractors and trade school and union representatives to learn more about how to go about training and applying for work on the project.

Ultimately, the project's major contractors and their subcontractors will do the hiring, but the Met Council will monitor to make sure that, over the life of the project, hiring meets diversity goals of 18 percent minorities and 6 percent women.

Utility relocation is wrapping up in Minneapolis and St. Paul, and major construction of the line will begin in March. Walsh

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Construction will handle the St. Paul segment, and Ames/McCrossan will construct the Minneapolis portion.

So how badly needed are these jobs? Nationwide, unemployment in the construction industry recently rose to 17.3 percent, nearly double the nation's overall unemployment rate, according to the Associated General Contractors of America.

The association said there's been growth in nonresidential construction jobs funded by the public sector, thanks in large part to the federal stimulus package, but those gains have been offset by declines in private sector construction of all types.

The U.S. unemployment rate has remained above 9 percent for the past year.

Frederick Melo can be reached at 651-228-2172.

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