

Jobs group wants more minorities, women building Central Corridor line

It wants more minorities, women to build Central Corridor

By Frederick Melo

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Major work on the Central Corridor light-rail transit line has yet to begin, but a coalition of community groups on Friday sounded an alarm over what they deem to be large shortfalls in the numbers of female and minority construction workers involved in the preliminary stages.

Their chief concern, however, remains the makeup of hiring moving forward, they said, as the state's largest public works project is expected to generate 800 construction and management jobs annually into the year 2014.

"This is essentially the opening salvo," said Louis King, a lead organizer of the HIRE Minnesota coalition. "The early stage of the project did not meet minority hiring goals."

In St. Paul, minority "work hours" on the project are about half the Metropolitan Council's stated goals, and the percentage of female work hours also falls short, although less dramatically so.

Contractors acknowledge the shortfall but say they expect those numbers to quickly improve as they grade and pave city streets. Work over the past year has involved relocating underground utilities, which requires highly skilled labor that can operate dangerous equipment in confined spaces. They say there's a shortage of trained women and minorities with corresponding skills, experience and federal and state certifications.

King, president of Summit Academy OIC, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that provides job training for low-income adults, presented his concerns about minority hiring Friday to the

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Counties Transit Improvement Board during its monthly meeting in St. Paul.

The CTIB funds metro-area transit projects with revenue from a quarter-cent sales tax and a \$20 motor-vehicle sales tax. The board works closely with the Metropolitan Council, the regional planning agency overseeing construction of the Central Corridor line between the downtowns of St. Paul and Minneapolis. The project is expected to be up and running in 2014.

With major construction slated to begin in March, King said the use of women and minorities so far raises concerns going forward.

King said the Met Council set a goal that 18 percent of workers would be minority and 6 percent would be female, but actual hiring has been well below that. On St. Paul's Fourth Street, where utility relocation is nearly three-fourths complete, the Bolander and Sons firm reports 9 percent minority work hours and 4.25 percent female work hours.

"Many sub(contractors) have underperformed even worse," the HIRE coalition said in a written statement

presented at the CTIB meeting. "CKC Contracting, for example, reported over 5,000 hours worked with not one single hour of minority or female workers on the job — ZERO."

Mark Ryan, president of St. Paul-based Bolander and Sons, doesn't dispute King's findings.

"That's probably pretty accurate, I think," Ryan said. "Up to this point, it's been a lot of skilled work. A lot of it has been work that the respective unions don't have minority workers to fill those positions — pipefitters, equipment operators.

"Working around live gas, live power, fiber-optics, duct banks, takes an extremely skilled equipment operator, and historically there have not been minority workers to fill those positions," he continued.

He said the next two months will focus more on surface projects — grading streets, paving sidewalks, and curb and gutter work — and the number of minority and female work hours is expected to pick up.

Laura Baenen, a spokeswoman for the Central Corridor project, said Walsh Construction, the major contractor for the St. Paul leg of construction, has a good track record of meeting "work-force inclusion" goals. In addition, the Met Council maintains the "CCLRT Works" database to help identify minority and female job candidates.

"The project has work-force goals, but these are NOT requirements," Baenen said in a written statement to a reporter. Under state and federal labor rules, "contractors on public projects over \$100,000 must either meet these goals OR demonstrate a good-faith effort to meet them."

A general contractor, Graham Construction, is near completion of preconstruction work on the west end of the project, near the University of Minnesota. While Graham met the Met Council goals for minority and female hiring, its subcontractors did not, according to the HIRE coalition. The overall work force there was 14.3 percent minority and about 4.2 percent female, broken down by work hours.

With more than 3,000 hours worked, subcontractor St. Paul Utilities and Excavating, Inc. distributed 5.4 percent of those work hours to minorities and none to women.

HIRE has asked for immediate changes. Among them, the coalition maintains that Central Corridor construction projects should not be approved until general contractors submit a work-force analysis and projections for hiring women and minorities. The group wants the Met Council to make those plans available for public comment before awarding contracts.

The group is also asking the council to develop a timeline for ensuring there are enough trained workers before major construction in the spring.

Baenen said the major civil construction contracts already have been awarded, so the changes HIRE is looking for aren't realistic.

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Central Corridor Job Expo

To recruit workers for the Central Corridor light-rail transit project, the Metropolitan 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 be from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Nov. 12, and workers will be able to enter their names into a database to receive e-mail notifications about job opportunities.