

Another study shows minorities, women fare poorly in PBC contracting

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WEST PALM BEACH — Firms owned by minorities and women got only a sliver of the contracts their presence in Palm Beach County suggests they should have received, according to a county-wide study commissioners received Tuesday.

The study, which cost \$750,000, is the second to show **large disparities** between the contracting opportunities afforded to firms owned by white men and those owned by minorities and women. Commissioners also have gotten an overview of a study showing disparities in contracts issued by the Solid Waste Authority, which oversees garbage and recycling collection.

Both studies were undertaken by Mason Tillman Associates of California and both have generated **fierce opposition** from those who view them as a prelude to race- and gender-based programs they argue would give minorities and women an unfair and illegal advantage in winning government bids.

Intensifying that opposition are the enormous stakes.

With proceeds from an **increase in the sales tax**, the county is in the midst of spending \$810 million over the next decade upgrading roads, bridges and county-owned buildings. And the Solid Waste Authority is expected to award seven-year garbage hauling contracts next year that could be worth a combined \$450 million.

Women and minority business owners have long complained that they haven't been getting their fair piece of the county contracting pie. They view the studies — along with the race- and gender-based programs they recommend — as the first steps toward righting those wrongs.

“The data is very clear,” said Brian C. Johnson, a black business owner and the vice mayor of West Park in Broward County. “There's been a disparity. Let's be honest about that.”

The county-wide Mason Tillman Associates found that, from 2009 through 2013:

- Black-owned firms got 10.7 percent of prime construction contracts, which were worth a combined \$6 million — less than 1 percent of the total value of the prime construction contracts awarded during that time period. Black-owned firms made up 13.2 percent of the market. Firms owned by white men were 59 percent of the market but got 68 percent of the contracts and nearly 87 percent of the payments made from them.
- Firms owned by Hispanics were 8 percent of the goods and services market but got 5.8 percent of the contracts, which were worth a combined \$17.5 million — 3.5 percent of the total value of all goods and services contracts issued from 2009 through 2013. White male-owned firms, meanwhile, were 66.4 percent of the market but received 78.3 percent of the contracts and 83.6 percent of the money from them.
- Firms owned by white women were 19 percent of the professional services market but got 9.8 percent of the contracts and 5.9 percent of all of professional services contract money paid from 2009 through 2013. White male-owned firms were 57.1 percent of the market and got 72.5 percent of the contracts and 74.8 percent of the money paid through professional services contracts.

Commissioner Mack Bernard, who has pushed for both disparity studies and urged commissioners to adopt their race- and gender-based recommendations, was incensed by the findings for firms owned by black women.

Such firms got none of the 1,457 construction prime contracts worth less than \$50,000 that were issued from 2009 through 2013 despite being about 2 percent of the market. They got none of the \$28.1 million worth of professional services funds paid on contracts worth \$50,000 to \$301,000 despite accounting for 4.2 percent of the market.

“I have three daughters,” Bernard said. “When they grow up, they have no shot of getting work in this county whatsoever.”

As with the debate about the Solid Waste Authority’s study, discussion about the county-wide study split along racial lines. White business owners questioned the study and urged commissioners to steer clear of race- and gender-based programs set up to address disparities. Black business owners pointed to the study findings as confirmation of their long-held beliefs that they weren’t getting a fair chunk of county contracts.

After a three and a half-hour debate that stretched into the early evening Tuesday, commissioners voted unanimously to receive the county-wide study and to extend Mason Tillman’s contract for another 90 days so its officials can be available for feedback. Commissioners also pledged to make a decision on what

to do about the study's findings and recommendations when they meet on Jan. 23.

They are scheduled to discuss the Solid Waste Authority's disparity study on Wednesday at 9:30 a.m. at the Weisman Governmental Center at 301 N. Olive Avenue in West Palm Beach.