

# As Airport Construction Project Gears Up, Black Business Participation Still At Ground Level

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As the Charleston International Airport taxis towards another major construction venture, the issue of minority business participation in the entity's economic still is awaiting takeoff.

The Charleston International Airport Terminal Redevelopment and Improvement Program was completed last year. The project cost over \$200 million. In 2011 the aviation authority, which regulates the airport, announced a minority business participation goal of 8.2 percent.

Austin-Hitt Contracting, general contractors for the project, committed to spending about 25 percent of the total project budget with minority firms. Last week Austin-Hitt reported it spent a combined 35.7 percent of the total construction spending with Women/Minority/Disadvantaged/Small Business Enterprises (MWS/BEs) for a total of about \$41.93 million.

Maurice Washington, principle partner in Trust Management, LL, which was hired to insure minority business participation, said by the end of his contract in March of 2015 payouts to minority contractors, who included white women and other minorities, was less than 15 percent of the total amount of money paid for construction and professional services contracts. The percentage paid to Black owned firms was significantly less, Washington said.

Recently the authority announced plans to build a new parking garage are moving forward. The project is expected to cost about \$135 million. Charleston County Aviation Authority Commissioner Andy Savage said he believes minority business participation at the airport should be ongoing. The airport has annual revenues of about \$30 million.

Charleston Sen. Marlon Kimpson has been among those leading efforts to insure black owned businesses get a fair share of the economic pie represented by activities at the airport. Like Savage, he also believes minority business participation at the airport should be ongoing.

In a September 13 letter to the authority's commissioners, Kimpson said he was disappointed in the lack of African American participation in the construction project.

Kimpson has requested a comprehensive report detailing procurement awards in the project. His letter also highlighted the need to move forward on opening business opportunities for ethnic minorities in the airport facility.

The reported shortfall on the construction side and the obvious lack of Black owned businesses inside the airport brings into question the commission's commitment to inclusion, he said. Despite ongoing discussions there has been no meaningful progress, he added. Ethnic minorities deserve to fully participate in the commercial opportunities at the airport, he said.

"I plan to use every tool available to me to ensure ethnic diversity and inclusion of those who have been historically and continually left out of the process," he said.