

Business activists push city to offer more contracts to minority firms

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A coalition of activists is ramping up pressure on Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh to award more public contracts to women- or minority-owned businesses after the city acknowledged in May that it sent only a tiny amount of its business to those firms.

In a letter to Walsh and Boston city councilors Tuesday, organizations including the Lawyers for Civil Rights, the Massachusetts Minority Contractors Association, and the Greater Boston Latino Network said that it is “alarmingly clear that [the] disparity in city contracting has affected Boston’s diverse business community for far too long.”

“The amount of wealth being lost each year in communities of color as a result is astounding,” the coalition wrote.

The letter was prompted by the release of the first of its kind city data that show that [less than 1 percent of \\$664 million in contracts](#) for construction and professional work went to women- and minority-owned businesses in Boston’s fiscal year 2018. The data were the result of an ordinance passed by the City Council that requires quarterly reporting on discretionary contracts, such as purchases of paper products, construction materials and services, and landscaping projects and professional services.

Walsh himself in 2016 signed an [executive order](#) pledging training and technical assistance for minority- or women-owned business enterprises, or M/WBEs, and setting spending goals for city contracts; for instance, it said 20-25 percent of architectural and engineering prime contracts under \$500,000 should go to firms owned by minorities.

On Tuesday, Walsh said he had not read the letter but welcomed input on how to increase the diversity of city contractors.

“Certainly, I was concerned and disturbed by our low numbers,” Walsh said at an East Boston event. “And I think the more voices at the table, the better it is.”

Walsh said the numbers reported in May do not explain the extent of the city’s business diversity dealings, as they did not include work that was subcontracted out by vendors to women- and minority-owned firms.

Still, he acknowledged there’s more work to do.

“The cornerstone of the administration has been inclusion and reaching out to people, and clearly we’re reaching out, but the inclusion aspect of it didn’t seem to take here in this contract stuff,” Walsh said.

City officials also said they are working to increase the diversity of contractors by hosting a series of workshops, trainings, and fairs aimed at boosting the prospects of small firms owned by women and minorities.

In the letter, the coalition of business activists laid out a series of steps they said the city should follow to improve the chances of women- and minority-owned businesses to getting city contracts, including breaking down large contracts “into smaller pieces that smaller companies can successfully compete for,” streamlining or eliminating criteria for project bids, and establishing small or local business programs that could “increase M/WBE participation.”

The process of awarding subcontracts also needs to improve, the coalition said, because prime contractors often “tend to simply go back to subcontractors they have used in the past — an ‘old boys network’ that excludes M/WBEs.”

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