

City reaches diversity goals on construction

ELLIOT WAILOO SEP 13, 2017 | CONTRIBUTING REPORTER | yaledailynews.com

At the tail end of a \$1.7 billion dollar project to renovate and build 42 Elm City public schools, New Haven reached its recent diversity goals for construction hours logged by women, minorities and New Haven residents.

Mayor Toni Harp announced last week that the city had reached its targeted percentages, which were set in a labor renegotiation three years ago, for the ongoing School Construction Program, a 22-year-old initiative. The current diversity goals encompassed construction for three schools — Engineering & Science University Magnet School, Dr. Reginald Mayo Early Childhood School and New Haven Academy.

Between those three schools, hours logged by women accounted for 7.7 percent of all workforce hours, as compared to 6 percent during construction prior to 2014. Twenty-four percent of hours were logged by New Haven residents, a jump from 20 percent.

These changes came after the city negotiated a new Project Labor Agreement with contracting companies in 2014, said Lil Snyder, the program manager for the city's Small Contractor Development Program. The previous PLA was not conducive to a diverse workforce because it limited the capabilities of nonunion companies, which are more often staffed by minorities and women, she said.

“In the past, that nonunion company could not bring their workforce with them, all they could bring was the supervisor,” Snyder said. “We negotiated the ability for the nonunion companies to come on union jobs and also bring up to five of the employees.”

The workers at the New Haven Academy site significantly exceeded the standard metrics, as 46 percent of workers were minorities and 55 percent were residents.

According to Jonathan Prete, the vice president of A. Prete Construction, a New Haven-based company that oversaw the construction site, these metrics were a result of close monitoring and the warning of potential financial repercussions.

“We do daily reports where our subcontractors have to report how many residents, how many minorities, how many women are working,” Prete said. “If the contractor is deficient in one of those categories, a letter would go to their office ... stating that you are below your requirements. Within the next month you have to bring them up or you will be subject to fines.”

Officials said that one of the chief goals of the project was to put payroll dollars back into local communities, which are often ignored when companies from Hartford and Danbury are contracted.

The economic incentives for the city are both short-term and farther-reaching, said Angel Fernandez-Chavero, the director of the city’s Center for Equal Opportunity.

“There’s an immediate economic benefit because more people of color and more residents have gotten good jobs that will help them and their families, as well as the city and the region,” he said. “Longer-term, we hope that, because of the experience they gain and formal training, they can get a certification of some kind or start an apprenticeship program with a labor union or a contractor.”

When workers get a certification or an apprenticeship, they can enter higher-paying positions and gain access to membership in larger unions, which are gateways to more contracting jobs.

Additionally, hiring local workers benefits business, Snyder said, as local workers tend to buy materials and supplies from local suppliers.

“If we get local minority workers from the community, that money is reinvested back into the community,” she said. “They’re buying their gas from the community, they’re buying the tools from the local Home Depot.”

The announcement of the success was recent, but Fernandez-Chavero noted that, although the metrics have been reached, there is room for continual improvement and there are always ways to provide more opportunities for people of different backgrounds.

The first opportunity will come early next year, as the city will leave the diversity goals in place as they make headway on the final construction of the 42-project program, the renovation of the Strong School in Fair Haven. According to Snyder, ground will be broken on the project as early as February 2018.

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