

County Fund To Improve, Support Employee Diversity

The fund will create a variety of pathways to employment for people who are currently underrepresented in construction and small businesses.

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From Multnomah County: To help build a more diverse workforce, the Multnomah County Board has approved a new fund to increase the supply of women and minorities entering the construction trades and provide small business development.

The Construction Diversity and Equity Fund will draw 1 percent from county remodeling projects with budgets above \$200,000 and new construction over \$1 million.

County commissioners unanimously voted to create the fund on March 15. It takes effect July 1, the start of the county's fiscal year.

In the last few years, Multnomah County has undertaken more than \$750 million in projects, including the Central Courthouse, Health Department Headquarters and Sellwood Bridge.

"The construction field does provide family-wage jobs," [County Chair Deborah Kafoury](#) said before the vote. "Yet women and minorities have not always been welcomed into this work. These are great jobs — and everyone should have an opportunity to have one."

The fund will support pre-apprenticeship programs, retention programs and other supports for groups that have long been underrepresented in the building trades. Funds will support small certified businesses with technical assistance and training in developing bids, back office support and mentoring.

The goal is to create a pathway for people who don't have a traditional pathway — through a family business — to rise in the trades.

"For many generations the family has been the institution that has replaced construction workers" when older workers retire, [Bill Kowalczyk](#), a former carpenter who teaches at-risk students at Portland YouthBuilders, told county commissioners before the vote.

"I come from a family like that," Kowalczyk said. "The family and its cultural network provided me the cultural training to survive and thrive in the construction industry. But

that system does not work well for everybody. This has been a difficult system to change."

The new fund will support organizations like YouthBuilders, a Southeast Portland alternative school that provides pre-apprenticeship training to young people who often come from minority and low-income families with no connection to the trades.

"Highly skilled construction jobs are a ticket out of poverty," Kowalczyk told county board members. He recently brought 20 of his students to the County's [Health Department Headquarters](#) building that is under construction next to Union Station. "We stood on the 8th floor of that building, watching the windows and electrical go in. A good number of the workers looked like our students. One young woman apprentice told our students she loves her job and loves to come to work."

"You commissioners, through your leadership and vision, gave our students this experience," Kowalczyk said. "That day I had students tell me yes, I want to be a sheet metal worker or a carpenter."

Increasing the supply of workers Multnomah County has been a leader in creating project labor agreements for major capital projects like the new [Central Courthouse](#).

The agreements require the trades and contractors to diversify hiring on specific projects. Those agreements "address the demand side" of the equation, explained Kelly Haines, of WorkSystems, Inc., which supports workforce development in Multnomah and Washington counties.

"This 1 percent program addresses the supply side," Haines said. "It will train people from this community who are qualified and ready to do this work."

Why are supports like pre-apprenticeship programs needed if labor is in short supply during the building boom? William Mazzara Myers, an executive with the Columbia Pacific Building Trades Council, shared a key statistic at the board meeting to explain.

"Research shows that only 32 percent of women and 33 percent of minorities continue past their apprenticeship to the journey level," Mazzara Myers said.

Journey level workers make up the higher paid, full-time employees who make their trade a career.

"That retention rate is not acceptable," he said. "We need to build an infrastructure to support these folks as they engage with their profession. This fund will support mentoring and technical assistance programs that focus on retention."

[County Commissioner Lori Stegmann](#), who co-sponsored the resolution with Kafoury, credited several County staff members for developing a plan for the fund. She thanked her senior policy adviser Roberta Hunte, Kafoury's senior policy adviser Liz Smith

Currie and Purchasing's diversity and supplier officer Lee Fleming for working with stakeholders to design the program.

"This effort is an upstream approach to increase economic prosperity in a more intentional and equitable manner," Commissioner Stegmann said. "It will have a long-lasting and stabilizing effect on our communities."

"While we have been deeply committed to the issue of homelessness, it is equally important that we invest resources into policies like this that can provide a pathway out of poverty, while creating a vital workforce."

After July 1, one percent of construction and professional services funds on remodeling projects over \$200,000 and new construction over \$1 million will be set aside to support disadvantaged workers and businesses.

As an example, Liz Smith Currie explained that in the last three fiscal years the County had 38 remodeling projects that each cost over \$200,000, in addition to its new building projects.

Roberta Hunte explained that the new fund "will augment, rather than backfill, our current efforts. County Procurement will engage County departments and external stakeholders representing workforce, professional services firms and contracting organizations to develop funding priorities for the use of the funds."

The program will be managed by County Purchasing staff.

Mazzara Myers told commissioners they are "setting the gold standard for the region... This is what a collaborative process looks like... It helps the construction industry as we work to be more reflective of the communities we work in."

Lee Fleming, reflected on the impact the new fund could have had in recent years, when the County spent three quarters of a billion dollars to build the Sellwood Bridge, Central Courthouse and Health Department Headquarters.

Those projects account for nearly one million labor hours, he said.

Gregory Roseboro is a young African American laborer apprentice who epitomizes the kind of dramatic impact pre-apprenticeship programs can have. He graduated from the local Constructing Hope program.

"It saved my life," he told county commissioners. "They helped change my life. I was headed in a direction that wasn't very positive. Today I make \$20 an hour and I'm working on a \$900 million project in Salem. It will be the largest single story structure in Oregon. I'm pleased with what I do and I'm pleased with what's in my life today. Thank you and thanks to Constructing Hope."