

Diversity in business: Years of work close to finally paying off

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CHAMPAIGN — After years of preparation behind the scenes, new initiatives for increased city participation with minority- and women-owned businesses are close to the finish line.

It's a satisfying sight for Patrick Thompson, president of Champaign's VEYA Inc. Construction. He's been meeting with city officials since the early part of the decade to improve diversity initiatives like the ones that stand a city council vote away from implementation.

After starting VEYA in 2009, Thompson noticed that there was "very little diversity in the business world," especially in his line of work. Hoping to see more people who look like him in offices and on construction sites, he started to get involved with the city.

Mayor Deb Feinen took note of Thompson's commitment while publicly thanking him last week.

"You've been continuously asking for change," she said. "You continue to push us without being aggressive. Thanks for continuing to hang in there with us."

Proposed changes

The initiatives, which won the initial approval of the council last week, come in two parts — tweaks to the city's Equal Opportunity in Purchasing Ordinance and the creation of a Champaign Diversity Advancement Program.

The EOPO would be changed to more clearly define "good faith efforts," which determine whether a contractor appropriately tried to meet the city's goals for inclusion of women and minorities. This would be accompanied by more monitoring and enforcement efforts from the city's Community Relations Office.

The proposed new definition states that "the city will consider the quality, quantity and intensity of efforts made by a contracting entity in determining whether (it) acted in good faith," according to a city staff report.

The proposed CDAP, which businesses would join via certification, includes six main components, according to the report:

- Baseline diversity goals at 10 percent for minorities and 5 percent for women.
- Requiring that city department heads meet with the city's compliance officer annually. They'd discuss upcoming projects and figure out whether those baseline diversity goals should be raised.
- A designated procurement initiative to increase the city's use of local, economically-disadvantaged contractors — no matter their backgrounds. Smaller and more manageable contracts would be provided for this, according to the report.
- Ongoing outreach and recruitment by city staff to attract eligible businesses to the CDAP.
- A mentorship program focused on training needs and opportunities, in addition to providing networking and encouraging joint-venture arrangements between contractors and businesses in the CDAP.
- Setting up a training and development fund for businesses.

"We're making sure we have as many components as possible to make sure this works," said Rachel Joy, the city's community relations manager and compliance officer. "We knew we couldn't do just one thing — we have to have a menu of options."

Embedded in all the initiatives are ways to assess what works — and doesn't work — and then make tweaks to the programs as needed.

'The driving force'

In order for the proposed initiatives to be effective, there are some loopholes to avoid. Thompson said it isn't uncommon for some companies to find ways to circumvent good faith efforts and mislead about the level of their diversity.

Joy said the city would address that by "constantly and deliberately monitoring" companies it contracts with, in addition to having them fill out good faith effort forms that they can be held accountable to.

Councilwoman Alicia Beck said she supports the proposed initiatives but is concerned about having enough city staff to implement them well.

"I'd hate to see us put stuff out there as options and not be able to fully deliver on them," Beck said. "Maybe make this a phasing process where we don't do it all at once."

Before the rollout, Joy said the city would first determine a staffing plan.

"We do expect there will be some staffing changes — we're not sure if it's getting additional staff or restructuring duties," Joy said.

After traveling around the state and evaluating other city governments, councilman Will Kyles said Champaign's proposed initiatives are the most encompassing ones he's seen. He's looking forward to seeing how the changes could help the city — both economically and socially.

Thompson echoed that sentiment, saying he believes that the best way to increase this kind of diversity and inclusion is through government.

"Government should be the driving force," Thompson said. "This shouldn't be passed on to general contractors."