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KCI project reveals unions' failure to include minority-owned firms

By The Kansas City Star Editorial Board
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The [\\$1 billion terminal project](#) for Kansas City International Airport has revealed some uncomfortable truths about the lack of diversity in many local labor unions.

Long-simmering tensions between construction trade unions and the minority community have surfaced as both groups seek contracts for the airport project. Labor leaders argue that this should be a “100 percent union job,” and minority leaders want to make sure that [Edgemoor](#), the developer, makes good on its pledge to ensure at least 35 percent participation for women- and minority-owned businesses.

Those objectives [are at odds](#) because a relatively small number of women- and minority-owned firms are unionized.

Decades of unwelcoming and sometimes outright discriminatory behavior by organized labor toward minority- and women-owned firms have left the city in this difficult position. And while unions have an important role to play in the construction of the new KCI terminal, the reality is that this can't be both an all-union project and include 35 percent minority- and women-owned firms.

The latter should be a priority. And an exception allowing Edgemoor to hire non-union minority firms likely will be needed.

The unions bear the brunt of the responsibility for this intractable quandary. Their [past attitudes and behavior](#) toward minority-owned shops have consequences. Today, only about half of the approximately 640 firms certified by the city as women- or minority-owned are union firms.

To their credit, union leaders acknowledged some of the mistakes that have been made in the past during a meeting Tuesday, which drew more than 100 people to the auditorium of the Robert J. Mohart Multipurpose FOCUS Center.

The design-build team of Clark Construction, Weitz and Clarkson made their pitch, a kind of reconciliation offer of promised perks for union members. To be sure, the enticements for union members are appealing: pre-apprenticeship programs, general contractors training, mentoring and high school and college internships, as well as a range of business supports such as bonding help and a

loan/grant program. In addition, there are promises of transportation by bus to the job site, help finding child care with extended hours and onsite medical care.

Firms were invited to unionize for the terminal project only, to gain a piece of the action.

Not surprisingly, this proposal was met with skepticism from women- and minority-owned businesses. How, exactly, this arrangement would be managed by the 18 trade unions that will be involved in building the terminal is still an open question.

Moreover, it's offensive to many that a chance for a piece of this massive project would be held out as the prize for joining the very unions that have been so unwelcoming in the past.

No firms should feel that they must join a union to win a contract from this once-in-a-generation project.

Labor leaders are promising a new direction, pointing to turnover in their ranks within recent years. They emphasize that new leadership will be more inclusive and will be open to innovative ideas.

But if the boilermakers, bricklayers, cement masons and plasterers, pipe fitters, iron workers, sheet metal and other trades are serious, they'll work on long-term plans for diversifying their ranks rather than just trying to cut a deal for the airport project.

The unions can build goodwill by disclosing details about their membership. How many current members are women or minorities? This could be a starting point for unions to begin to make needed changes and set targets for women and minority membership at the completion of the terminal project.

Clearly, [Kansas City](#) has a tremendous opportunity at its doorstep. At peak periods during terminal construction, between 1,200-1,500 workers will be needed daily. On average, about 850 workers will be employed.

The KCI terminal project is frequently described as “transformational,” a unique opportunity for both the city and the firms that are involved. The capacity of many smaller shops could be developed and a new generation of skilled, diverse laborers could be trained.

As the City Council continues to negotiate the final memorandum of understanding with Edgemoor, ensuring that minority- and women-owned firms participate must remain a priority.

Managed fairly and openly, there is great opportunity here for the long term benefit of all Kansas Citizens.