

Native Americans no longer qualify as minorities in city's construction bid program

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HOUSTON – Native Americans do not qualify as minorities in the City of Houston's construction bid program. City officials blame a federal court injunction that removes Native Americans from the Minority and Women Business Enterprise Program.

The city is currently conducting a new disparity study, something done every five years, that could change things.

Nathali Parker sees opportunity in potholes and road improvement projects. Her company that she co-owns with her sister, KLP Commercial, connects road and freeway construction solutions with contractors.

She "geeks out" over asphalt because the work is her saving grace. Nine years ago, her dream job, her Hollywood sports production company failed, left her penniless and \$50,000 in debt. She wondered if she'd ever bounce back.

"You lose everything material wise and you get to find out who you really are," she said.

Her sister pulled Nathali into a new business.

Four years later, their company, 100-percent owned by Native American women, won bids across Texas and work in Houston.

Their minority status greatly helps them win contract bids, Parker said. But that changed March 22, 2016.

"This was a phone call and then it's on the City of Houston Office of Business Opportunity website saying that Native Americans are no longer a minority business enterprise on construction projects," Parker said.

Off camera, an Houston OBO spokesperson blamed a federal district court injunction that prevents the city from giving Native Americans minority status in bids.

A federal judge found "insufficient evidence to support including Native Americans as minorities."

The opinion cited too few examples of discrimination. However, future disparity studies "based on more concrete evidence of discrimination" could reverse the decision.

KLP worked for years to develop connections. However, since the ruling, they have not won bids in town.

“The physical reaction is like getting kicked in the teeth and the stomach,” Parker said. “You worked so hard and you sacrifice...we have employees who are feeding families. We’re risking everything.”

For now, she travels to keep her company afloat while hoping one day they can win bids at home.