

## EDITORIAL

# On city contracts, Boston only talks the talk on diversity

Boston Globe / May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Embarrassing is the only word to describe the City of Boston's record for hiring minority or female contractors.

Last week the city, under a new ordinance that requires quarterly reporting on its contracts, [divulged that only 1 percent of the \\$664 million](#) Boston awarded in 2018 for construction and professional goods and services went to businesses owned by people of color or women.

Put it another way, out of the [5,122 contracts the City of Boston](#) inked last year, only 28 were given to companies owned by minorities, and only 30 were given to firms owned by women. These contracts are for expenses such as buying paper products, construction, and landscaping projects.

It's particularly disappointing coming from Mayor Marty Walsh and economic chief John Barros, who have trumpeted City Hall's commitment to diversity through policies that aim to close longstanding inequities.

Isn't this the administration that was going to teach [private developers how to set their diversity goals high](#), whether they're building in Winthrop Square or in the Seaport?

Rather, the Walsh administration is offering up a different lesson: Do as I say, not as I do.

Barros attempted to explain the city's poor track record by blaming it on a supposed dearth of minority and female government contractors.

"The willingness to contract is there; the number of contractors is not," [Barros told the Globe](#).

In 2019, that explanation sounds more like an excuse.

There are a number of recent efforts — among them, the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce's [Pacesetters Initiative](#) and the [Business Equity Initiative](#) — that help connect anyone looking for minority- and women-owned vendors. The chamber program alone has vetted 73 minority suppliers, which has resulted in 18 contracts valued at a total of more than \$3 million.

Better yet, just ask Massachusetts casinos — MGM Springfield, Plainridge Park Casino, and Encore Boston Harbor — how they have managed to spend millions of dollars with minority-

and women-owned businesses. In 2017, the casino industry spent about \$617 million on vendor and supplier contracts in Massachusetts, of which about 22 percent involved minority- and women-owned businesses, according to the state Gaming Commission.

Sure, casinos doling out private contracts probably operate under fewer legal restrictions than government contracts, but that's not the only reason. The commission not only sets specific diversity goals but also monitors progress and publicly releases the data quarterly. If a casino lags, for example, on hiring women in construction, the commission knows about it and can address the issue immediately.

In 2016, [Walsh signed an executive order](#) to promote equity in the city's procurement process, even setting aside specific diversity goals. The mayor demonstrated a will, but he's fallen short in finding a way.

The City of Boston can do better — and it has to. The mayor needs to send a message that City Hall wants to do business with everyone, not just the well connected. The process needs to be more transparent, and barriers to minorities and women need to be removed. If a \$500,000 contract is too big for many minority- and women-owned businesses, how about breaking it up into two to three contracts to increase the pool of potential contractors?

Walsh likes to talk the talk on diversity. Now it's time to walk the walk when it comes to city contracts.