

Rebuild could offer blueprint for more diverse Philadelphia construction industry | Opinion

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Getting work on a major City project can help small contractors take their business to the next level. I know, because five years ago my engineering firm doubled in size as a result of securing two major public works contracts.

I also know the hurdles small minority contractors face when bidding for large, complex capital projects. As Chairman of the Greater Philadelphia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, I regularly hear stories about the lack of trust between minority subcontractors and the general contractors who would hire them. Issues like tough payment terms, poor contract opportunities, and the major effort it takes for a small business to get certified on the City's minority business registry have persisted among small diverse contractors for decades. These barriers prevent minority businesses from feeling like it is worth their time to pursue City projects.

As the prime contractor on the Rebuild projects at the Heitzman Recreation Center and McPherson Square Library, I see firsthand how the City of Philadelphia is taking steps to provide more access to minority- and women-owned businesses that want to be part of City capital projects.

First, Rebuild is prioritizing diversity in prime contractors. With an ambitious target to award at least a quarter of professional services contracts and a third of construction contracts to minority- and women-owned firms, Rebuild has put an emphasis on hiring minorities and women — both of whom are often underrepresented on City-funded projects. As a prime contractor, my minority-owned, Philadelphia-based firm brings a network of diverse business partners onto the Rebuild projects I lead

So far, Rebuild is actively engaging small, diverse businesses. Through regular networking events that introduce project leads to diverse local firms, Rebuild is giving minority businesses a new avenue to pursue work on large commercial projects. Rebuild's call for interest form gives small, diverse businesses another way to promote themselves. As a prime contractor, I have a ready-to-use database of interested minority businesses to source subcontractors and find partners to assist with Rebuild projects.

A key goal of these partnerships is to help small and diverse firms secure bonding, prepare successful bids for public projects, and build the back office functions required to secure bigger projects. This month, the Rebuild Ready program will begin its third training cycle, offering 20 diverse Philadelphia businesses free professional development. Since launching last year, 43 businesses have completed the program and are now better positioned to bid for and win work on Rebuild projects.

When recruiting businesses to meet diversity goals, the City asks minority-owned businesses to provide proof of ownership. But this certification process can be complicated and time-consuming for small contractors to pursue, if they lack back office staff to process paperwork. Rebuild's Emerging Vendors Program is helping small, local minority- or woman- owned design and construction businesses get the certification they need to count toward the City's diversity goals. These businesses can be counted toward diversity goals for Rebuild contracts, while they work toward permanent minority- or woman-owned certification for all City contracts.

Only time will tell if the Rebuild model is a long-term success, both in project completion and participation of diverse businesses. But a year into the program's implementation, Rebuild is on track to meet or exceed its goals for minority contracts on both professional services and construction work. The new practices offer a promising model to other City departments and capital projects. Efforts to diversify the construction industry require hard work on all sides. I believe those efforts will yield results that make our city better for all.

An inclusive design and construction industry is critical to making sure the construction boom we are experiencing is sustainable and creates opportunities that help more Philadelphians find financial security.

These are big goals that will not happen overnight. But through Rebuild, our city has an opportunity to test practical changes on how construction contracts are awarded. I'm experiencing it firsthand. If effective, I believe the results could offer a blueprint for widespread improvement in building sites across the city.

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