

Seattle leaders share lessons about increasing construction workforce diversity

By Cristina Rojas
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With the Portland-area's building boom fueling a demand for skilled construction workers, Metro has been working with its regional partners on efforts aimed at recruiting and retaining more women and minorities to bring more diversity to the workforce.

Metro launched the Construction Career Pathways Project last summer amid growing concerns about the lack of diversity in the construction trades as the \$244 million Hyatt Regency Portland project became closer to a reality.

"If we've got a project of that size and we can't figure out a way to get more minority workers at that project, then we probably ought to just give it up," Metro Council President Tom Hughes said during an event co-hosted earlier this month by Metro and Construction Apprenticeship & Workforce Solutions.

"The problem is even with a big job like ours, it doesn't last that long and the folks that work there are not going to work on getting a journey card so we began to talk about ... organizing as a region around this idea of finding a pathway for minorities and women to get that journey card and get established in permanent jobs in the construction trade," he said. "It's a pretty simple thing to say. It's harder, we've discovered, to do."

On Sept. 18, more than 75 government workers from the region met with Seattle-area officials to see what they could learn from each other about creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

The panelists were Mark Wheeler, project labor agreement manager at Sound Transit; Anna Pavlik, labor equity program manager for the City of Seattle; and Samantha Kealoha, labor equity program manager for King County.

The panelists said that even though the agencies found success with their own initiatives, collective efforts were needed to address the challenges of keeping the pipeline of skilled workers filled.

'A regional problem'

"These issues that we're dealing with like getting more people of color into the pipeline and keeping them in the pipeline is a regional problem rooted in racism, sexism and institutions that have been built up over time," Pavlik said. "We also wanted to achieve a greater scale and we can only do that by when we're working together."

Their research showed that only 40 percent of apprentices continued on to earn their journeyman's card. For women and minorities, that number was even lower: 32 percent of women and 33 percent of minorities.

In 2015, Seattle, Tacoma, Sound Transit, the Port of Seattle, King County and the Washington State Department of Transportation formed a group with the goal of diversifying, expanding and retaining the workforce that's needed to keep public construction projects running on time and on budget.

The group shares resources and best practices and has begun to standardize its data reporting.

Its priorities include expanding pathways to apprenticeships, strengthening retention and completion rates, aligning and championing efforts for greater diversity and sharing accountability for common outcomes.

The panel said the project labor and community workforce agreements that the different agencies use have proven effective in helping them meet their goals.

Sound Transit, Seattle and King County have contractors and unions enter into a PLA or CWA that standardizes wages and working conditions and requires them to provide apprenticeship opportunities and give hiring preference to local and disadvantaged workers.

Seattle's Priority Hire initiative, for example, applies to city projects worth at least \$5 million.

Since Washington state law prohibits the use of racial and gender preferences in public hiring, contracting and education, the city and county instead uses economically distressed zip codes in Seattle and King County to increase hiring from underrepresented communities. The criteria includes people living under 200 percent of the federal poverty line, the unemployment rate and those older than 25 who don't have a college degree.

"We can increase the number of people from the community becoming union members," Pavlik said. "So they can get the benefits, pay of a union member and when they leave that public project, they can go to work on another commercial project."

The panelists also discussed the need to invest in pre-apprenticeships, training and support services.

Sound Transit currently requires contractors to pay at least \$.05 for every hour worked by employees under the PLA, but Wheeler says they're looking to increase that to \$0.25 to cover the rising costs of training. The city and county have similar programs.

The city also created the Regional Pre-Apprenticeship Collaboration to bring pre-apprenticeship programs, public agencies, apprenticeship training coordinators, union representatives and community-based organizations together.

"Clearly if you're going to do this work — and it's true of any public initiative — you have to have major stakeholders, you have to set realistic goals, you have to communicate what you're doing and once you have the program up and running, you have to have a proactive compliance model," Pavlik said. "When we say we're hiring in these zip codes, it's not an aspirational goal. It's a mandatory requirement and if you don't hit mandatory requirements, we can withhold pay."

Wheeler says they want diversity and inclusion to become the way of doing business.

"It makes good business sense to make sure that you've got a diverse and inclusive workforce," he said.