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The Seaport's New Omni Hotel Is A Win For Diversity And Inclusion

OPINION

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It will be the fourth largest hotel in Boston with two 20-story gleaming towers. The new Omni Hotel — planned for South Boston’s Waterfront District — will feature 1,000 rooms, a luxury spa, elevated pool deck, fitness center and the second largest ballroom in New England. So spectacular that Omni Hotels & Resorts is spending “\$500,000 a key” to make it a showplace. Omni’s owner Robert Rowling promises, “When we finish with the property you’re gonna walk in and say 'wow.'” But the look of the hotel is not the only wow factor, because the Omni Hotel Waterfront represents much more than the sum of its ritzy parts.

It also marks an innovative approach in creating *real* participation for Boston’s minority and women investors. The Massachusetts Port Authority wove a diversity requirement into the Omni deal which placed value on minority and women-owned firms and equitable partnerships. Language that insured minorities and women were in the center of the action, not sideline participants. It’s “a game changer,” says Richard Taylor, of the New Boston Hospitality Group, the umbrella organization formed to represent the women and minority investors.

And big money for investors who are in on the ground floor for what’s projected as a half-billion-dollar development. This could not have happened, says state Sen. Linda Dorcea Forry, without “intentional inclusion.” Forry, who represents South Boston, made her enthusiastic remarks last week at the official unveiling of signage and renderings for the hotel, which is scheduled to begin construction in 2018 and open in early 2021. Gathered under a tent on the future location of the project, a dizzying array of VIPs and government officials, including Governor Baker, Mayor Walsh, and Congressman Stephen Lynch. Also in the crowd, the largest gathering of African-American and women business professionals I’ve ever seen in Boston — literally a who’s who lineup. Prominent among them, the owners of the minority and women-

owned architectural and construction firms with a combined 30 percent participation in the hotel's design and building phases.

There are rarely win, win, win situations in Boston when it comes to power and money, but the Omni Hotel deal seems to be a three-fold achievement. Not only will the project bring about significant economic parity for minority and women businesses, it will also create thousands of construction and trade jobs. And, a windfall for six local nonprofits, including the South Boston Clubhouse of the Boys and Girls Boston, and Julie's Family Learning Center, which will receive a portion of the hotel's profits.

But the biggest win here is long term — a new model for diversity and inclusion that is being applied to future Massport projects. Will other city and state agencies follow this blueprint? Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito praised the Omni Hotel project as one that will “showcase all that the Commonwealth's workforce and economy has to offer.” I'll be watching to see if — finally — “all” includes diversity and inclusion.