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Highway 40 project meets diversity goals



AUG. 10, 2009 -- Congressman William Lacy Clay (at podium), D-St. Louis, and Pete Rahn (far right), director of the Missouri Department of Transportation, hold a news conference Monday on the western edge of Clayton Avenue overlooking Highway 40 construction. (Christian Gooden/P-D)

By Elisa Crouch

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

08/11/2009

ST. LOUIS — As heavy equipment rumbled behind him, U.S. Rep. William Lacy Clay stood at the edge of the Highway 40 work zone Monday to get a glimpse of its diversity.

He seemed satisfied.

"When this first began, there was a lot of skepticism" about the diversity of the work force, Clay, D-St. Louis, said after meeting with Pete Rahn, head of the Missouri Department of Transportation.

Not anymore, Clay said, adding, "This is possibly a national model."

Clay's visit to the Highway 40 (Interstate 64) work site came almost a month after demonstrators briefly blocked Interstate 70 downtown during the All-Star Game festivities.

They called for Missouri and Illinois to hire more minority-owned businesses for public projects, pointing especially to the planned \$640 million Mississippi River bridge north of downtown.

Rahn said the Transportation Department hopes to duplicate with the bridge what it's done with the \$535 million Highway 40 project, such as an on-site job training program for women and minorities.

"We have very aggressive targets," Rahn said at a news conference with Clay.

Gateway Constructors, the contracting team rebuilding almost 10 miles of the highway, has exceeded the goals it agreed to for minority contractor participation.

Almost 19 percent of the contract dollars are going to businesses owned by minorities or women, according to MoDOT, compared with the goal of 16 percent. Sixty-six percent of those businesses are owned by African-Americans.

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And of the 490 workers on the job, 105 — or 21 percent — are listed as minorities. That exceeds the project goal of 14.7 percent. The percentage of women on the job — 6.6 percent — falls short of the 6.9 percent goal, however.

"In my 26 years of elected office, I cannot remember a more aggressive effort of inclusion in a project," Clay said.

Not everyone is so complimentary.

"It's been successful from the standpoint of work force," said Eric Vickers, spokesman for the Minority Inclusion Alliance, which advocates for minority contractors. "Where it is lacking is getting minority businesses involved."

Those businesses, he said, should be getting one-third of the Highway 40 work, he said — almost twice the state's goal.

"There's got to be an emphasis on both," he said.

As Clay met with subcontractors and workers from the Highway 40 project, Alfred Long, 31, said the job helped him get started with a career. He began on-the-job training on Highway 40 in 2007, shortly after work started, with the goal of becoming a laborer. Last month, Long obtained journeyman status. Next, he hopes to get degrees in physical science and construction management.

"It's good that they give us a chance," he said.

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CTech August 11, 2009 2:27AM CST

Quit whining and choose the BEST company for the job, regardless of race, color, gender or sexuality! Sheesh!



RedXIII August 11, 2009 5:20AM CST

Couldn't have said it any better myself. I agree!



luvmysoftail August 11, 2009 5:37AM CST

I agree with the above comments. I just want to add, I am thankful I will not have to travel on this highway anytime soon. Meeting goals and have qualified people are two different things. Just think if you had to choose doctors based on a quota system. Can you imagine the quality of care (or lack of) you would experience in a hospital?

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