



REFORMS AIM TO SPREAD WEALTH - CITY CONTRACTORS BACK NEW PLAN FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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Author: Dave Orrick ; dorrick@pioneerpress.com

It's not every day in St. Paul that leaders from City Hall, the black community, minority- and female-owned business groups, neighborhood coalitions and large general contractors can crowd into a room and applaud each other.

But that was the scene Thursday morning inside the meeting room of Selby-Dale Community Development Corp., as Mayor Chris Coleman rolled out a series of reforms aimed at spreading more money -- via city-controlled jobs and contracts -- among groups often left out of the equation.

The fact that so many varied and often competing interests were represented -- from Kraus Anderson general contractors to B&L Electric Supply Inc. to civil rights groups like the St. Paul NAACP -- was as much the news as the reforms themselves; a broad spectrum had convened and agreed on a plan to right a wrong.

The focus is to create a system that solicits and embraces minority- and female-owned businesses underrepresented for years in the city's spending.

Its most important and immediate change: create a Department of Human Rights and Equal Economic Opportunity and expand the Human Rights Commission. The new department will have broad control over various aspects of city contracting that previously had been spread among numerous departments, none of whose primary goals was economic justice.

While the plan's chief architect is City Attorney John Choi, it is the result of numerous public and private meetings between Choi and various interests. Hundreds of people were involved, Coleman said, adding that the plan was the culmination of "decades worth of work."

City Council Member Melvin Carter III, the only black elected city official, described the reforms as the "most significant expansion of our city's commitment to human rights in over 40 years."

Coleman directed Choi to get cracking on a plan after an independent audit, performed at the request of the city, concluded that in 2007, less than 7 percent of \$220 million in city contracts went to companies owned by women or minorities and 0.3 percent went to firms owned by blacks. The audit did not conclude that the city was discriminating intentionally but rather that the bureaucracy lacked an effective structure to enforce its own goal of giving minority contractors a bigger piece of the pie.

"When I came into office, I knew something had to be done, but I didn't know what it would look like," said Coleman, who inherited the disparities -- and associated tensions -- from previous administrations. "A city is not whole unless everyone is part of the picture."

Many of the reforms are free but will require bureaucratic flexibility not easily found in large cities. Civil-rights enforcement, contract analysis and procurement, contract investigation and enforcement all will be brought under the control of the new department. Currently, those disciplines are the scattered domains of Planning and Economic Development, Safety and Inspections, Human Rights and Finance, as well as the city attorney's office and the Human Rights Commission.

But some will cost money. The most obvious is the hiring of someone to head the new department. The process, to include a "community-based hiring committee," will be similar to hiring a police or fire chief, Coleman said. The position carries a three-year term, and the director will answer to the mayor, but the Human Rights Commission also would have oversight. The position would be insulated from political whim through a checks-and-balance system involving the City Council.

It's unclear when the hiring process would begin or who might apply. One possible candidate, Tyrone Terril, director of the Department of Human Rights, said he was in "wait-and-see mode."

Before the reforms can be instituted, they need to be adopted as ordinances by the council, a process that will take at least a month and include at least one public hearing.

Another yet-uncalculated cost of the reforms will be building a database of minority and female contractors. Officials hope the effort will become regional, involving Ramsey and Hennepin counties and Minneapolis at least. Supporters hope such a system will boost the prevalence of such contractors throughout the region.

Nathaniel Khaliq, who leads the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP, said the recent series of community meetings, which often featured passionate declarations about maintaining independence for the department director, was essential to everyone buying in. "This may not be a perfect plan, but it is a plan that was issued from the bottom up, not the top down," he said.

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