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## Minority contractor group rises from years' old ashes

**BY WENDY CULVERWELL**  
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The Oregon chapter of the National Association of Minority Contractors is reconstituting itself after falling dormant for almost a decade.

A kickoff and chapter initiation will be held from 5:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. March 16, in the hospitality room of Northwest Natural, 2200 N.W. Second Ave.

The organization is open to anyone who supports its mission of advocating for the interests of African-American and other minority businesses, said Faye Burch-Wilson, a longtime activist for women- and minority-owned contractors in Oregon who is organizing the revival.

The Portland Development Commission, Kaiser Permanente and the Black United Fund of Oregon are sponsoring the revival of the minority contractors group.

The association has about 30 paid members. Annual dues are \$250 — a downright bargain compared with the \$300 members paid before the group essentially disbanded about eight years ago, said James Posey, president.

Posey said the association fell inactive when the economy slowed and members struggled to keep their businesses going.

"They just didn't have the wherewithal to keep it going," he said.

With the economy improved and construction booming, the old group of leaders decided it was time to revive the advocacy organization to promote the interests of minority-owned businesses.

A separate initiative, initiated by former Portland City Commissioner Francesconi, has a similar aim. The Construction Apprenticeship & Workforce Solutions Inc. initiative aims to attract more women and minorities to work in the construction industry.

The second time around, Posey expects the contracting association to go beyond advocacy and become a networking organization, with the eventual goal of building the capacity of black-owned businesses to take on major jobs.

Posey, who owns Workhorse Construction Metro Inc., said success will be measured in years. He would like to see at least two to

three black contractors in Oregon that have the capacity to take on large jobs.

Roy Jay, president of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Oregon, said the renewal of activity for the contractors association is a mixed blessing. All things being equal, he said the minority-owned business community wouldn't need such an association.

Organizers see opportunities for minority-owned contractors to participate in multi-billion-dollar public and private projects.

From Portland's South Waterfront district, which involves millions of dollars from the Portland Development Commission, to the Oregon Department of Transportation's 10-year, \$1.3 billion project to replace or rehabilitate more than 300 highway bridges, there should be opportunities for black- and minority-owned firms, they say.

ODOT is a major focus for the group. Constrained by a federal court ruling that prohibits governments from setting minority contracting goals without evidence of discrimination, ODOT has aspirational targets instead, said Michael Cobb, who directs the department's office of civil rights. In January, ODOT initiated a disparity study to establish if minority-owned businesses are indeed discriminated against.

In the interim, it has a small business contracting program designed to foster growth among Oregon contracting firms.

The program makes it easier for small businesses to qualify for contracts worth \$75,000 or less. It focuses on professional and technical services and has already awarded a handful of contracts.

Cobb said the best way to match small business with contracts is to work on the barriers that keep them from teaming with the prime contractors ODOT hires to carry out its highway and bridge work.

"The disparity study is not the answer to small businesses finding more contracting opportunities," he said.

Posey said the under-representation of businesses owned by minorities and women in major construction projects underscores the need to reactivate the contractors association. People are beginning to see that unless they advocate on their own behalf, they will lose ground, he said.

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