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## ODOT supports small businesses with streamlined contracting process

*Published: September 18, 2007*

The Oregon Department of Transportation is used to big numbers. ODOT is responsible for maintaining and upgrading more than 8,000 miles of state highway and employs more than 4,500 people.



The budget for what is currently the largest project, the 10-year OTIA III State Bridge Delivery Program, is \$1.3 billion. Of the 365 bridges in the program, contracts to repair or replace nearly 300 bridges are worth tens of millions of dollars.

But besides maintaining highway safety and mobility, the agency is also charged by the Legislature with stimulating Oregon's economy, and to do that, it had to get small.

In 2005, the Small Business Administration reported that of the nearly 26 million firms in the United States, most are very small—97.5 percent have fewer than 20 employees. Nonetheless, these firms account for half of the United States' nonfarm real gross domestic product. They have generated 60 percent to 80 percent of the net new jobs during the past decade. The Oregon Economic and Community Development Department reports similar statistics: Currently 90 percent of all Oregon business enterprises employ 20 or fewer people.

Compelling numbers such as these were part of the inspiration for ODOT's Small Business Initiative, a comprehensive plan to increase economic opportunities for Oregon workers and businesses. As part of this initiative, the agency has developed the Small Contracting Program for Professional and Technical Services.

The Small Contracting Program works like this: A simplified procurement process registers firms to participate in the program and have the opportunity to be selected as prime consultants for ODOT contracts valued at \$74,990 or less. Initially implemented through a successful pilot program in the Portland metropolitan area, the program is launching statewide in September.

To date, 10 firms are under contract through this program, with a total dollar value of nearly \$750,000. Five additional contracts are in the development stage and are expected to boost the contracted value well over \$1 million.

"Awarding contracts of this size—which are relatively small for us but relatively significant for small businesses—involved a new way of thinking for ODOT," said Director Matt Garrett.



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In the first month—October 2006—the agency registered 117 firms in a wide range of disciplines. Of the more than 160 companies currently registered, approximately two-thirds are disadvantaged, minority-owned, women-owned or emerging small businesses.

Jean Ochsner's company, Environmental Science & Assessment, qualifies under three of those four categories. Specializing in natural resources management services for public infrastructure projects, the six staff members of ES & A have worked on transportation projects from Jackson County to Portland and are eager to expand their range with this new contract with ODOT.

"Because we're small—this year we'll make around \$600,000—a contract of this size is a good chunk of our income," Ochsner said. "The payoff was especially great because the application and contracting process was so easy—we didn't have to spend excessive time and consequently dollars marketing ourselves."

Tom Nelson and Associates LLC is a 17-person specialty surveying firm whose recent work includes staking the landmark Portland Aerial Tram. Through the Small Contracting Program, the firm has also just signed its first contract with the state transportation agency.

"We're excited about the chance to work directly for ODOT," said Tom Nelson, P.L.S., owner of Tom Nelson and Associates. "As an emerging small business, we really appreciate the commitment that ODOT managers have made to finding innovative ways to get us contracted and providing services."

ODOT's efforts to simplify its contracting processes were based on input from the small business community. In response to such feedback, the agency will work quickly to draw up the contracts, get people working, and get companies paid.

"All across Oregon, small businesses will have opportunities to work directly with ODOT in a way that wasn't possible in the past," Garrett said. With the Small Contracting Program statewide rollout, ODOT will be getting small to help businesses grow.

Learn more about ODOT's Small Contracting Program.

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