

The Register-Guard

EUGENE, OREGON

The Register-Guard

SECTION **E**

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2006

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City/Region

"We want to give jobs to people right here in Oregon and help our economy."

— KAREN JONES, COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER, OREGON DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Goal to build bridges promises jobs for Oregon workers

By DIANE DIETZ
The Register-Guard

The binge of highway construction work stalling drivers all over Oregon may prove to have a salutary side effect.

State officials predict the push to finish 365 bridges in a decade will require a big jump in the number of skilled workers on the job and will open opportunities for women, minorities and others who struggle to succeed in Oregon's economy.

"Frankly, Oregon hasn't done a great job of diversifying its workforce, so this is incentive for us to do

Officials say the highway construction push could open opportunities for many, including women and minorities

that. The bridge program was a great opportunity," said Karen Jones, a communications manager for the state Department of Transportation.

The workforce that put up the first 46 bridges under the \$1.3 billion state program was 8.5 percent women and 6.7 percent minorities, all employees of private construction firms that contract with the state.

ODOT hopes to increase those percentages to 14 percent women and

14 percent minorities by the time all the bridges are done in 2012.

The peak bridge-building season will come in 2009, requiring the maximum number of laborers, carpenters, heavy equipment operators, cement masons and iron workers, according to ODOT.

The state drafted a Workforce Development Plan that uses existing employment institutions to vet, test and ready candidates to go into

apprenticeships. Locally, the Lane County Workforce Investment Board will handle the job.

The plan calls for recruiting in both traditional and alternative high schools, reaching all the way down into Girl Scout troops to look for its future heavy equipment operators.

Case managers will help candidates identify their goals and connect with training programs. They may provide support such as tutoring or child care. The plan calls for mentors to help new workers succeed.

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Highway: Labor pools may be needed

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The plan requires contractors to boost the amount of apprentice labor they use to 20 percent of the work hours in specific crafts such as electrical work or carpentry, up from 5 percent now.

"We don't want to have the contractors go looking to import a bunch of people," Jones said. "We want to give jobs to people right here in Oregon and help our economy."

The state set up the first of five regional labor pools for contractors. Hiring from the Portland pool begins in January, Jones said.

Contractors must draw first from the Associated General Contractors or from their labor unions for apprentice candidates with state pools as a backup, Jones said.

CONSTRUCTION JOBS

The state Department of Transportation offers information about employment and apprenticeship opportunities in English and Spanish.

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Some in the industry are skeptical that the state labor pools will be needed.

Mark Holiday of the International Union of Operating Engineers — which represents 4,200 heavy equipment operators largely in Oregon — says plenty of people, including women and minorities, are waiting for the work right now.

"It's a bunch of bureaucrats

with nothing else to do, and they're thinking overtime," Holiday said. "We're keeping up with the demand. If they want more, they're going to get more."

Red Gililand of Eugene-based Wildish Standard Paving said his operation has not run short on workers yet, but it gets tougher when the company gets orders for bridges in Eastern Oregon.

The state plan calls for moving 400 people a year into apprenticeship programs — and there's no doubt they're going to be needed, Jones said.

"We've got record levels of construction," she said. "It's the most construction Oregon will see since the Interstate system was built 50 years ago. We just don't have the number of people ready to take off and work."