

ReTHINKING PORTLAND

State program bridges gaps in construction work force

By Matthew Garrett

When the Legislature funded the third Oregon Transportation Investment Act in 2003, it directed Oregon's Department of Transportation to repair or replace hundreds of aging bridges and to outsource the work to private companies, thereby improving the economy through expanded job opportunities for Oregonians.

We at ODOT faced a good news/bad news scenario. The good news was that such an extensive undertaking would create many new family-wage jobs. The bad news was that Oregon, like many states, faced a shortage of skilled construction workers.

Projections showed that an increase in private projects combined with attrition due to retirement would diminish the construction work force. By 2012, Oregon would face a shortage of nearly 15,000 workers in the industry.

Our solution to the work-force shortage is to build opportunities in the labor pool and lead Oregonians to long-term careers through our Workforce Development Program. The program qualifies and trains candidates, especially women and minorities, for highway construction jobs.

While developing the program, we worked from the premise that people need sustainable, well-paying careers, not more temporary jobs.

Now, ODOT's Regional Workforce Alliances are implementing the program by bringing together work-force development systems and resources. Through the alliances, applicants receive training for careers as ironworkers, operating engineers, carpenters, laborers and cement masons.

Last fall, the American Public Works Association presented the ODOT program with its Diversity Exemplary Prac-



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tices Award, confirming that we are on the right track in creating sustainable opportunities for the state's many qualified workers.

As the OTIA III State Bridge Delivery Program enters its peak construction years, we'll continue to meet the challenge of expanding and diversifying the state's construction work force. We have applicants in our qualified labor pool and an established outreach program in Oregon communities.

ODOT's Workforce Development Program empowers people through meaningful careers and new skills, ensuring a better future for them and for Oregon.

Matthew Garrett is director of the Oregon Department of Transportation in Salem.

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