



DAILY JOURNAL OF COMMERCE

\$1.25

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Friday, January 5, 2007

Oregon hopes bridge repairs can launch diverse workforce

■ *ODOT's goal is to have 14 percent women and 14 percent minorities working on the \$1.3 billion program by the time it ends in 2012.*

EUGENE, Ore. (AP)— State officials say Oregon can train a generation of skilled workers, including women and minorities, as it pushes to rebuild and repair hundreds of bridges.

The Legislature in 2003 approved an ambitious program to fix cracking bridges, setting aside \$1.3 billion for work on 365 state bridges over a decade.

The workforce that worked on the first 46 bridges was 8.5 percent women and 6.7 percent minority group members, all employees of private construction firms that contract with the state.

ODOT hopes to increase those percentages to 14 percent women and 14 percent minority members by the time all the job is done in 2012.

"Frankly, Oregon hasn't done a great job of diversifying its workforce, so this is incentive for us to do that," said Karen Jones, a communications manager for the Oregon Department of Transportation.

The state drafted a workforce development plan that uses existing employment institutions to vet, test and ready candidates to go into apprenticeships. It calls for recruiting in both traditional and alternative high schools, reaching down into Girl Scout troops to look for future heavy-equipment operators.

Case managers will help candidates identify their goals and connect with train-

ing programs. They may provide support such as tutoring or child care. The plan calls for mentors to help new workers succeed.

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. 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.

Some in the industry are skeptical of the state labor pools.

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."