

Opinion

Grants Pass Daily Courier

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ODOT focus on apprenticeship programs wise

Oregon Department of Transportation officials are to be commended for looking down the road and trying to head off, through apprenticeship programs, a coming shortage of highway workers.

The effort should be good not only for the state and its transportation system, but for many workers seeking construction skills and family-wage jobs.

What ODOT is attempting to do is coordinate public and private apprenticeship programs, contractors, job counselors and others to give people an easy way to enter the field. Unfortunately, finding a good-paying job in the trades can often be a matter of luck, because there is little coordination among schools, unions and employers.

This is in spite of U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics showing an increasing need for skilled tradesmen in construction, plumbing, the electrical trade, masonry and other areas. The agency estimated in November that construction alone needs to come up with 190,000 new workers a year through 2012. The projected shortage comes not only from increased demand, but a sharp drop in the existing workforce due to retirement of the baby boomers.

ODOT officials say a study done in Oregon recently came up with similar results for the highway construction workforce. Highway and bridge construction in the state is expected to reach record heights the next two to five years, funded by the \$2.4 billion Oregon Transportation Investment Act.

Attendance at the initial meeting to discuss the Regional Workforce Alliance ODOT seeks to form in southwest Oregon to coordinate apprenticeships was encouraging. The meeting, held Tuesday at Rogue Community College in Grants Pass, drew 40 people. The alliance will seek people to become laborers, equipment operators, carpenters, iron workers and cement masons. Journeymen in these occupations can earn \$20 to \$30 per hour.

Hopefully, hundreds of people, particularly young people who choose not to go to college, will be helped long term by this program and, in turn, aid the state in maintaining the transportation system so vital to its economy and quality of life.

It's too bad other trades can't come together to address projected shortages in their areas and work with the schools to give Oregon high school graduates not going to college alternative paths to learn a trade and make a decent living.

Giving them a goal and road map in high school might indeed keep them in school and reduce the state's horrendous drop-out rate. Only 80 percent of a freshman class graduates four years later.

For now, a tip of the construction hat goes to ODOT for foresight that should help the state and its residents, particularly those looking for roads to better lives.

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