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More businesses aim for diversity on building jobs

Premium content from **St. Louis Business Journal** by **Stephanie Thum**

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t's the classic small-business lament. You can't get the gig if you don't have the experience, and you can't get the experience if you don't get the gig.

Steve Cockerham, vice president of planning, design and construction for **BJC HealthCare**, understands that. So when he and his colleagues solicited proposals from general contractors to run BJC's new \$101 million, 12-story construction project at the northwest corner of Euclid and Forest Park avenues in the Central West End, bidders had to demonstrate a minimum 50 percent participation by certified minority- or woman-owned business enterprises (M/WBE).

The requirement exceeded BJC's standard, self-imposed goals for 10 percent participation by MBE firms and 5 percent participation by WBE firms.

"We know small firms need some help," Cockerham said. "We mandated the joint venture to create an opportunity for those firms to compete to gain experience at a higher level."

Several local bidders submitted proposals, and BJC selected the 100 percent M/WBE joint venture of Tarlton General Contractors and Interface Construction Corp. of St. Louis. Tarlton, led by President Tracy Hart, is a \$150 million firm with 250 employees. Interface, led by President Sam Hutchinson, is a \$25 million company with 75 employees.

"Through this joint venture, we anticipate learning from Tarlton's expertise, and they will learn from ours," Hutchinson said. "The benefit to BJC is being able to mirror the face of the community."

Such large-scale inclusion of minority- or woman-owned construction firms is not new. Construction projects funded by federal, state and local taxpayer dollars mandate certain percentages of M/WBE participation.

The city of St. Louis, for example, asks bidders to strive for 25 percent MBE and 5 percent WBE participation on proposals for projects like the new North County Recreation Complex. Planners from the Missouri and Illinois transportation departments aspire to 14.7 percent MBE and 6.9 percent WBE participation on the upcoming \$640 million Mississippi River bridge project.