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I-74 minority contracts exceeding mandates

Training sessions have helped give contractors a leg up, they say

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BY MATT BUEDEL
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

PEORIA - When Herman Johnson started his construction company four years ago, he knew only what he had learned on the job over the previous 30 years as a heavy equipment operator.

This year, with the help of a communitywide effort that included training sessions from the Illinois Department of Transportation, Johnson's J&J Construction is landing contracts worth well into six figures.

"I've always wanted to operate my own company, but I didn't know how to manage it," he said Thursday at a meeting between IDOT officials and minority community leaders.

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- Federal links
- Federal contacts
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organizations, such as the Peoria Black Chamber of Commerce, to help minority contractors grow fledgling businesses gave Johnson's company an edge in winning successively larger contracts, he said.

FRONT PAGE**WEATHER****SPORTS****OPINION****BUSINESS****ENTERTAINMENT****FEATURES****NEIGHBORS****SPECIAL****SECTIONS****MULTIMEDIA****CLASSIFIED****Announcements****Auctions****Automotive****Employment****Farm & Ranch****Garage Sales****Homes/****Apartments****Merchandise****Mortgage Rates****Personals****Public Notices****Recreation****SERVICES****Celebrations****Contact Us****Internships****Newspapers In****Education****Photo Reprints****Report a Birth****Single Copy****Outlets****Site Map****Submit an Ad****Subscriptions****Yellow Pages****More**

"We went from \$20,000 to \$100,000," Johnson said. "Now we're doing half a million."

He isn't the only success story. Other companies, such as Epic Construction, started in 2003 by Sam Hobson, and Central Illinois Rebar, owned by Roger Fleming, have benefited from apprenticeships and training sessions on cost estimation and erosion control, to name a few.

IDOT developed the programs in conjunction with the Interstate 74 overhaul in an attempt to exceed federal mandates for 9 percent of contracts and subcontracts to be awarded to minority-owned companies. That percentage has almost been doubled in both stages of construction.

"Right away, we realized there were needs in the community," said IDOT implementation engineer George Ryan, citing his department's emphasis on training local companies to work on state-sponsored contracts.

Minority contractors were generally proficient in performing field work but needed help in business management, Ryan said. So the highway department developed its programs accordingly.

Since then, minority-run businesses have accounted for 17 percent, or just more than \$17 million, of the three contracts for the first stage of I-74 construction, with nearly \$2 million paid out to black contractors, \$2.3 million going to Hispanics and about \$13 million to female contractors.

For the ongoing stage-two work, IDOT has committed 15 percent, or just more than \$26 million, to minority companies. Black contractors are expecting \$8.3 million, while \$7.5 million is earmarked for Hispanic contractors and females are due about \$11 million.

"Across the state, no one else can boast numbers like these," said Joe Crowe, district engineer for the Peoria area.



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