

It cripples us all

ODOT's chronic failure to do business with African Americans in Portland must end

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W e long ago learned that numbers can be looked at in lots of different ways. But zeros? From any angle, they pretty much tell the same story.

And zeros -- big fat ones -- are what the Oregon Department of Transportation seems to keep coming up with when it looks for the number of highway construction contracts being signed by African American business owners in Portland.

It's a pattern that has endured for decades, a desert of opportunity watered only by the occasional oasis that all too often turns out to be a shell company in which a minority contractor serves as a front for whites in hardhats.

In 2005, the U.S. 9th Circuit Court ruled that state departments of transportation had to abandon "race-conscious" disadvantaged business programs. But there was a caveat. Such programs could survive if both "statistical and anecdotal evidence" showed contracting inequities to have occurred. And so, early last year, ODOT conducted yet another Disparity Study, uncovered the latest long line of zeros, then applied to the secretary of transportation for a waiver so that it might reinstate its race-based "hard goal targets."

Enough already with this nonsense.

We don't need more procedural footsie. What we need is a healthy dose of actual leadership from agency director Matt Garrett. He should simply direct his staff to start bringing him results instead of excuses.

It's not as if ODOT lacks a role model: Mr. Garrett, meet Mr. Hansen.

That would be Fred Hansen, general manager of TriMet. Glance at any TriMet construction project these days around Portland and you'll see lots of people of color. They didn't get the work because they have a special talent for building light rail. They got it because Hansen ordered his organization to make it happen. The tools he handed them include the right to:

Break contracts into bite-size packages so that smaller firms could bid.

Husband resources to cover cash flow for minority contractors.

Stage workshops where contractors could learn more about everything from estimating jobs to financing growth.

The results? When TriMet built the Interstate MAX light rail through North Portland, it contracted with a wide range of African American businesses. Since then, 24 of them have gone on to work on other TriMet projects.

If anyone at ODOT still is confused over why all this matters, here's a little reminder. Portland has in its midst a community -- the African American one -- with far too little wealth. The way to fire the generation of wealth in a community is to give it the kindling of ownership.

We're tired, already, of waiting. That's because consistently, overtly denying economic opportunity to one section of our community doesn't just hurt that minority. It cripples us all.