

Many use the beginning of the New Year as a time for reflection. The celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday and Black History Month allows all Americans, especially African Americans to reflect on the continuous quest for civil rights for all citizens. While Dr. King's struggles to provide equity in the social and political arenas are well known, few talk about his interests in economic equality, which was a theme he championed later in his life. Unfortunately, Alameda County has a long way to go, in achieving that dream.

Over the past 2 years Mason Tillman has conducted an Availability Study for Alameda County. The study is designed to see if our contracting practices are equitable and accessible to all segments of our diverse business community. The study examines County contracts from July 1, 2000 to June 30, 2003. The results of the study clearly show that while the County has instituted a number of programs designed to allow small, local and minority owned businesses to acquire contracts with Alameda County, we have not achieved the goal of access and equity that the Board of Supervisors wishes, which must attain.

The study shows the County significantly underutilizes the Asian, Latino and Native American businesses that are capable of providing services for the County; the underutilization of the firms owned by African Americans is deplorable. Between July 1, 2000 and June 30, 2003, African Americans received 258 or just 2.2% of the contracts awarded. The 258 contracts awarded totaled \$6,051,853 dollars or 1.1% of the contract dollars awarded during that period.

Needless to say, I am dissatisfied with the number of contracts awarded to firms owned by people of color particularly African Americans, although I applaud quick response by the County's Administrators Office and County Department heads. Those in the County who are in decision-making positions are taking quick and appropriate steps to employ changes.

The analysis of the recommendations and strategies for the implementation has been assigned to the Procurement and Contracting Committee, which I Co-Chair. In the month of January the Committee hosted three community meetings to unveil the study findings and engaged the community for public comment and input. Some of the words from the community echoed much of what was said in the study. There are a large number of prime contractors that know how to avoid working with local firms, many owned by people of color. In addition, while the county policies are well intentioned our ability to track and enforce our contracting policies needs to be improved.

This is not the time for me, other members of the Board, the County Administration or other County staff to try to explain away the inadequacies of the County's Contracting and Procurement systems. We accept responsibility for

not achieving the goals of access in the County's contracting practices. The public hearings are a good step in the right direction, but we still have a long way to go. You can be assured as the Supervisor of the Fifth District, which is home to a large number of African American owned-businesses; I will continue the battle for fairness and equity in the County's contracting policies.

Keith Carson  
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