

MnDot challenged

Written by

Tuesday, 24 February 2009 17:02

Over 400 people rallied last Tuesday night at the American Indian Center on Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis for the third in a series of H.I.R.E. MN Town Hall Meetings and vowed to make their voices count as Minnesota and the nation struggle with job retention, job creation and saving the nation's economy.

On Wednesday afternoon, nearly 100 people showed up at the State Office Building for a hearing of a Minnesota House of Representatives legislative oversight committee on transportation. Speaker after speaker challenged MnDOT and the Legislature to ensure that the MnDOT hiring goals of minorities and women are enforced.

State Representative Bobby Joe Champion, vice chair of the sub-committee, thanked citizens for attending the meeting and said "I am looking forward to continuing our work to foster inclusion as a means to improve our quality of life. Please remain engaged and I encourage all of you to attend the State Legislature Town Hall Meeting on February 24, 2009 at the Minneapolis Park & Recreation Headquarters, 2117 West River Road, from 6:00-8:00. The meeting will allow you to hear about the Governor's proposed cuts and for you to provide testimony about what we, as legislators, should protect or cut to balance the State's budget."

Louis King called the effort a success. He described mobilizing workers and citizens and organizations as a "campaign with the right message, the right organization, and with bold and effective mobilization. This is a marathon and not a sprint," he said. "Let's give them more of what they came here for: sustained, effective and withering pressure."

H.I.R.E. stands for Healthcare, Infrastructure and Renewable Energy and the acronym has become the mantra and battle cry for an expansive group of progressive organizations and institutions committed to ensuring funding from the federal economic stimulus initiatives reach communities that too often were ignored and abandoned by "business as usual" practices and policies.

Louis King, President of Summit Academy Opportunities Industrialization Centers, and his co-chair for H.I.R.E MN, environmentalist Will Steger, President of the Will Steger Foundation, were joined by Jennifer Jimenez, of the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, Bill Means of Minnesota OIC State Council, Karen Monahan, Environmental Justice Advocates of Minnesota, Valerie Martinez, Clyde Bellecourt, of American Indian OIC and Al McFarlane, Editor In Chief of Insight News joined political leaders in calling the community to action around training and contracts for imminent federal and state spending for infrastructure improvements and renewable energy investment for the new green economy.

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Representative Karen Clark, Representative Jeremy Kalin, Councilmember Robert Lilligren, Councilmember Cam Gordon, Commissioner Toni Carter, Commissioner Peter McLaughlin, Commissioner Mike Opat provide legislative analyses of the value of effective community organizing and mobilization and listened to the concerns of their constituents.

Much of the evening's discussion focused on what was described as a consistently lackluster performance by Minnesota Department of Transportation in its effort and ability to support training and hiring of people of color for the millions of dollars of construction and road maintenance the department handles each year. Some 200 people signed post-cards yesterday requesting that MnDOT be accountable, transparent, and invest in a training system for communities of color.

King thanked partner organizations for attending the Town Hall Meeting. "Our government is making big decisions about how to stimulate our economy. This is happening at a time when climate change is considered by many scientists to be the most serious threat facing the world and while millions of people are unemployed," he said.

"We believe that making public investments in healthcare, infrastructure, and renewable energy can jump-start our economy, create living-wage jobs with affordable benefits for our communities, ease the climate crisis, and promote healthy communities," he said.

The rally ask participants to "demonstrate our power through calling elected officials to tell them to support House File 680, a bill outlining the use of federal weatherization funds in Minnesota. This bill would create jobs in weatherizing homes, making them more efficient so energy costs can be reduced. He encouraged participants to tell elected officials that the legislation will create much needed jobs in communities experiencing disproportionately high rates of unemployment, including rural, tribal, low-income, and communities of color.

Louis King testified that:

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- Mn/DOT has inadequate minority recruiting and training programs;
- Contractors do not follow rules on hiring goals;
- Mn/DOT does not adequately enforce hiring goals;
- The Legislature, until now, has not held the agency accountable.

King said the Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) is charged with recruiting employees and contractors from all of Minnesota's diverse populations.

- He said there is a lack of accountability at MnDOT that leaves many unanswered employment questions:

1. How many projects qualified for these goals?
2. What were the budget amounts of these projects?
3. What was the performance of each project against the goals?
4. Did Mn/DOT have an overall minority hiring goal for the period of 2007-2008?
5. Did Mn/DOT accomplish this goal for each year and what was the actual performance?

The office of Civil Rights conducted 14 in-depth EEO compliance reviews, on contractors working on Mn/DOT projects, each year in 2007 and 2008, he said.

King offered the following recommendations:

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- Increased Accountability: Amend the law to require quantitative results reporting to the legislature;
- Increased Transparency: Require the agency to establish a website that reports the quantitative information and contractor performance to the public on a monthly basis;
- Invest \$4 million in developing a robust recruitment and training pipeline that follows principles accepted by practicing professionals;
- Require mandatory training of prime contractors on hiring regulations and DBE participation and consequences for non-compliance;
- Invest more dollars in compliance officers to increase performance;
- Establish a community oversight committee that is independent of Mn/DOT;
- Require Mn/DOT to establish 25% minority/female participation on stimulus project goal areas (1800 jobs).