

OFF THE CUF

By David Jason Fischer

SOMETHING TO BUILD ON

More than two years after a high-profile commission announced initiatives to broaden access to construction careers, there are signs of progress – and reminders that change never comes easily

IF CONSTRUCTION IS NOT THE LAST OCCUPATION IN NEW YORK CITY IN

which individuals without a college education can earn family-supporting wages, it at least seems to be the last still-growing field here that offers a road to the middle class. Unfortunately, however, that road has been strewn with obstacles for many of the city's working families, from the boom-and-bust nature of the industry to a long and ugly history of unequal access to union membership and work.

With this in mind, in March 2005 Mayor Bloomberg created a commission to come up with strategies for opening up the city's construction workforce to women, non-whites, the economically disadvantaged and individuals from other groups who had been underrepresented in the past. The idea wasn't just to address the legacy of unequal access, but to help the industry develop a pipeline of young workers to serve as replacements for a wave of retiring Baby Boomers in the workforce. Our 2006 study, *Chance of a Lifetime*, found that more than 4,000 annual job openings are expected in the industry through 2012, at least partly due to the fact that the average age of unionized workers in the sector is nearly 50.

Almost three years later, the commission has achieved impressive successes, but still has some significant problems to overcome.

Mayor Bloomberg announced the initiative, known as the Mayor's Commission on Construction Opportunity, with one eye toward his re-election bid that November—Congressman Charles Rangel, a Democratic Party powerhouse, was a strong advocate for the Commission and ultimately gave the mayor his tacit support—and the other toward a projected construction boom in the five boroughs that included new stadiums for the Mets and Yankees, development of the World Trade Center site and Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, and mass transit projects such as the #7 subway extension, among others.

In October 2005, the commission announced ten policy actions. These included pledges from the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York to reserve 15 percent of apprenticeship slots for city high school graduates; 10 percent for women; and five percent for the economically disadvantaged in the first year, increasing by an additional one percent per year through

the commission's actions."

After a slow start, efforts to place economically disadvantaged New Yorkers into apprenticeships now seem to be on track as well. The commission's goal for 2006, its first year, was to fill 65 slots with low-income New Yorkers who reside in public housing. Participants would be prepared for apprenticeship through programs offered by the nonprofits STRIVE, a job-readiness provider, and Construction Skills 2000, a joint project of the Building and Construction Trades Council and their contractor counterpart, the Building Trades Employers Association. (In 2007, the program was renamed The Edward J. Malloy Initiative for Construction Skills.) But the organizers soon realized that the four months they had allocated for participants who had not completed high school to earn a GED was not sufficient. In 2006, providers ultimately placed just 41 economically disadvantaged individuals into slots, well short of the target. In 2007, they began

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2010. For its part, the city pledged to provide resources for a new high school teaching the construction trades, and to more vigorously enforce prevailing wage laws and monitor Equal Employment Opportunity compliance. All parties agreed to support pre-apprenticeship training for the targeted groups.

"It was groundbreaking," says Francoise Jacobsohn, a commission member and Project Manager of the nonprofit Legal Momentum, a legal advocacy organization dedicated to advancing the rights of women and girls. "There was a real attempt to try and make sure that everyone who was at the table was getting their concerns addressed."

Perhaps the most dramatic progress has come in the area of assisting women into the city's construction workforce. Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW), a nonprofit that has trained women for jobs in construction and other blue-collar industries since 1978, has helped place approximately 320 women into apprenticeship slots since late 2006. NEW has worked in particularly close cooperation with unions representing carpenters, mason tenders, plumbers, painters, elevator operators and electricians—all of which have exceeded the commission's 10 percent target. NEW President Amy Peterson states, "Our success over the last two years is a direct result of

recruitment earlier and allowed more time for GED attainment, and easily surpassed the target of six percent of slots, or 78; as of late December, approximately 90 had been placed.

The parties to the commission chose to target greater inclusion of high school graduates and "economically disadvantaged" New Yorkers rather than set explicit goals for racial diversity. Even so, advocates for African-American New Yorkers in particular looked to the body as a vehicle for redressing the discriminatory legacy of the trades. *The State of Black New York City*, a study released in November 2007 by the New York Urban League and Black Urban Alliance, included a full chapter on the construction industry; the authors noted a 6.1 percent increase between 1994 and 2004 (the latest year available) in African-American representation within New York City apprenticeship slots, but still found whites considerably over-represented compared to the city's overall demographic composition. Largely owing to the work of the program formerly known as Construction Skills 2000 continued improvement in these numbers is virtually assured: the Building and Construction Trades Council reports that the program has placed 809 young New Yorkers into apprenticeships since 2001, including 217 since January 2006, 87 percent of those placed are non-white,

including 47 percent African-American.

Corwin Spivey, director of workforce development for the Urban League, characterizes the commission as “moving in the right direction,” but notes the difference between boosting minority representation in the industry and ensuring that these individuals actually get jobs on a consistent basis at construction projects around the city. “They might be in the union,” he states, “but getting into the union and having equal or better hours doesn’t happen. As you speak to someone from the union, they’re quick to declare that they’ve got a lot of minority members. And they do. But how many of them are actually working? And what’s the gap between their jobs?”

The city plans to seek answers to these questions by closely tracking the demographic composition of apprentices over a five-year span, including the progress of those who advance to journey-person status over that time. The first reports on the data are slated for release in the coming months. But while advocates hope that this will create more transparency and ensure a greater degree of fairness, the city might be wise to ask unions to report data on who is actually working.

dent achievement and family income, critics worry that the school’s enrollment might be sharply tilted toward students from wealthier families. African-Americans are also under-represented at the high school, comprising only 10 percent of the student body; citywide, African-Americans account for just under one-third of total enrollment in the public schools. (Hispanics comprise 42 percent of the student body at the new high school.)

Speaking on background, city officials acknowledged the tension between the objective of ensuring success for the fledgling school and its students on the one hand, and that of expanding access to the educational experience it offers on the other. The Department of Education is contemplating the problem, officials say, but no specifics have been announced as yet.

Union leaders also vacillate between hope and doubt. The construction trades support the commission’s work for reasons idealistic and practical: the goal of “a workforce that mirrors the city” both aligns with labor’s best principles and helps ensure a comfortable relationship with city government that also increasingly mirrors the city. But leaders gripe that too-lax regulation of employ-

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Commission-related efforts to ensure a more diverse corps of new construction workers also have had mixed results. While Construction Skills 2000 has long been the path to apprenticeship for all public high school graduates, the commission’s deliberations informed the creation of a new High School for Construction Trades, Engineering and Architecture in late 2006. Now in its second year, the school seems off to a flying start: 43 percent of the 196 first-year students made the Honor Roll for 2006-2007, and the school’s attendance figure was 95 percent—compared to the citywide rate of 83 percent. For the school’s second year, 1,326 students applied for the 200 seats in the freshman class.

But there is some evidence that the school’s admission policies represent a breach of the spirit of the October 2005 agreement. The new high school is a “screened school” that includes no students who read at Level 1, the lowest attainment, though approximately 40 percent of all New York City ninth-graders do so. The school’s share of Level 2 students, who read at or near expected attainment, is disproportionately low as well. Given that research has shown a strong connection between stu-

ment and tax laws governing construction work, particularly in affordable housing, constrains unions from expanding apprenticeship opportunities—and undercuts contractors who play fair. A December 2007 report by the Fiscal Policy Institute flags the disturbing trend of more construction work in the city “going underground”—violating those laws—at a cost of upwards of \$500 million per year. Here, too, city officials acknowledge that the goals of developing housing, enforcing prevailing wage laws and enabling the broadest possible access to high-wage construction careers exist in considerable tension.

The Center for an Urban Future was an early champion of the Mayor’s Commission on Construction Opportunity, both for its specific potential to diversify the workforce in that industry and as a potential model for multi-stakeholder collaboration in other important sectors of New York City’s economy. Its success would help reaffirm the power of the public sector to right past wrongs and ensure fair play—and that its failure would serve to confirm the widespread skepticism about both the capacity of government to make positive change and how much opportunity truly remains in the city’s 21st-

century economy for those who begin life with disadvantages. Our research and reporting finds broad support for the early goals and achievements of the commission. But the various concerns and complaints—advocates’ fears that apprenticeship placements and the creation of the High School for Construction Trades, Engineering and Architecture might prove more cosmetic than substantive, union leaders’ consternation at the increasing volume of underground construction work despite government pledges of greater enforcement efforts—cannot go unaddressed if we are to achieve those goals.

In its biggest initiatives, from public schools restructuring to the work of the anti-poverty Center for Economic Opportunity, the Bloomberg administration has sought to quantify progress. With the Construction Commission, however, the only strictly quantifiable commitments have come from the Building and Construction Trades

Council and its member unions with respect to apprenticeship slots. The city should match that commitment with specific pledges of resources to enforce Equal Employment Opportunity and prevailing wage law, and that the new construction high school or other high schools to be created will offer greater access to construction careers for students from economically disadvantaged families. In return, the administration should hold the member unions accountable not just for their apprenticeship selections, but for verifying that, once brought into the trades, skilled tradesmen and women are working and earning at comparable rates across racial, ethnic and gender lines.

Nobody ever said the work of the commission would be easy. But a foundation is in place, and now it remains for city officials and industry leaders to build something of lasting pride and value for New York.

This Off the CUF was written by David Jason Fischer and edited by Jonathan Bowles.

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CUF Recommends

Fiscal Policy Institute, “The New York City Construction Labor Market,” April 2006

Fiscal Policy Institute, “Building Up New York, Tearing Down Job Quality,” December 2007

Center for an Urban Future, “Chance of a Lifetime,” May 2006

New York Urban League and Black Urban Alliance, “The State of Black New York City,” November 2007

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