

Program seeks to aid minority businesses

Project plans to link the small companies with larger employers

By TaNoah Morgan
SUNSTAFF

Minority businesses in Howard County may soon find it easier to generate contracts with the county's larger employers, thanks to a new program aimed at linking the groups.

The Private Sector Initiative, a project of the county's Equal Business Opportunity Committee, is an effort to help smaller, minority-owned businesses make vital connections with larger employers who need their services.

The program, scheduled to begin tomorrow with a presentation at the County Executive Conference Room in the Gateway business park, will create a series of informal forums to get the business groups to meet.

Robert L. Wallace, president and founder of Columbia-based Entreat LLC, and author of three books on minority entrepreneurship, will speak at the event.

He said supplier diversity is "critical" to large- and medium-sized businesses because the nation's population - and thus its customer base and work force - is growing more minority and female, and large corporations need to connect with their customers. But one very compelling reason for diversifying is in the bottom line.

"When companies use minority businesses, the cost of providing these services is often less, because there's less overhead, and these companies are hungrier," he said. "And there's a pipeline for new ideas to solving old problems."

The relationship is crucial to the minority businesses as well, he said.

"One of the things we've found if you look at successful minority and women-owned business, is there's a strong relationship between that business and a strong government customer or a strong corporate customer," he said. "To the degree minority businesses can build relationships, they can both grow.

After tomorrow's launch, EBO committee members will meet with the large company leaders to get a sense of their needs and then match them in forums with smaller compa-



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Participant: Robert Wallace, a business consultant, will participate in the Private Sector Initiative, a project of the county's Equal Business Opportunity Committee, to help minority businesses connect with larger companies.

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The focus of the program is to help smaller groups find opportunities for growth.

"Our goal is to build some partnerships and expand the economic base in the county," said Earl Saunders, EBO committee chairman. "There's always a need for minority businesses to be able to do more."

The event has been a year in the planning, spurred partially by the concerns minority business owners expressed when they talked with counselors at the county's small business development center, said Cynetta Cardwell, who helped coordinate the program.

Business owners such as Nellie Maletta, of AM-N-PM, a full-service, on-site computer business in Columbia, said many of her attempts at advertising her company's services to larger companies have been unsuccessful.

"We've done cold-calling, mass mailing, faxing," she said. "People choose their computer repairman the same way they do their auto repairman - it's based on trust."

But some larger companies say they could also use help in finding vendors.

Manekin LLC, Columbia-based

real estate company, uses a number of contractors, for construction and building maintenance, said Cole Schnorf, senior vice president for development at Manekin. Schnorf said several of them are minority-owned businesses, but Manekin has no specific program to recruit others.

"It's an area we could do some more in, and the need some help," he said. "When we go after government contract and there are some [minority business] requirements, its not easy to achieve."

In each forum, three to four larger companies will participate along with about 10 minority businesses. Representatives of the larger companies will explain their needs, purchasing methods and qualifications, giving the minority companies a sense of what they need to do to get the business.

The EBO has a similar initiative to open window in procurement for minority businesses with Howard County's government. The project resulted in the county giving more attention and information to minority business-owners about their procedures and, in some instances, some almost mentoring relationship.

But Saunders said a focus on the private sector is necessary as well, and he hopes some of the same types of mentoring can develop.

"It's a different approach in making the playing field equal," he said. "Most of us are comfortable doing business with people we know, and sometimes we don't look outside the box."

Organizers said they are not sure how often the forums will meet, but they will begin collecting information from larger companies and creating a database of minority and women-owned companies after tomorrow's launch.

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