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# **Apopka developers' initiative to boost minority-owned contractors**

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Jim Carchidi/OBJ

Apopka has been a magnet for new commercial real estate development in recent years.

Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of projects are in the development pipeline for the northwest Orange County suburb of

Apopka — not to mention projects already coming out of the ground there.

With that in mind, a new initiative is seeking to ensure that minority-owned small businesses and contractors based in and around the fast-growing suburb can share in the opportunities coming its way.

On Jan. 12, Small Business Advocates of Central Florida and the Apopka Area Chamber of Commerce announced they have entered into a partnership to operate a bid opportunity preference program, working with the developers and larger contractors active in the city to facilitate participation for small, minority-owned firms in these projects.

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**Why this matters:** Initiatives pertaining to diversity, equity and inclusion are important for creating new opportunities for local businesses and can help create a more dynamic marketplace.

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"It just really helps when the small, minority-owned firms that are here get to be part of building their community," said Mina Robinson, director for Small Business Advocates of Central Florida.

The agreement has drawn the support of the likes of Bengé Development, which has multiple mixed-use developments in the city, and Taurus Investment Holdings, which is the developer behind the Apopka City Center project.

Construction firms such as Finrock, Williams Construction & Development and Randall Construction were represented and support the plans, in addition to a host of other firms present at its signing.

As outlined in the signed written agreement, the bid opportunity preference initiative will do a number of things:

Get information out to local firms, contractors and tradespeople about the program.

Facilitate and provide certification opportunities for them and hold job fairs to attract additional talent.

Bring those certified firms and tradespeople to the larger firms and developers active in the city and identify opportunities on their projects.

Work hand-in-hand with the small, minority-owned firms and the larger firms to ensure successful completion of their work on a contract, which can be valued at up to \$5 million.

Participating firms must be verified and certified woman-, veteran- or minority-owned Florida businesses.

Progress and performance will be tracked, and one of the intended byproducts could be the creation of a database of local talent in the trades, which could benefit the larger contractors and developers as they work to staff out these projects.

"With the economy we're having right now, we're having a hard time with our vendor list ... finding a vendor that is vetted and can handle the project," said Donnie Williams, owner of Williams Construction. "This is going to be beautiful if we have a database with smaller vendors that can handle different sizes of projects."

Apopka City Commissioner Alexander Smith added that the intentionality created by the initiative could be a game-changer for many of the firms it will seek to support.

"A lot of times, the small minority business owners get left out of the big picture, primarily because they don't have the credentials they need," Smith said. "So having someone be an advocate for them is a great advantage for them."

The initiative also will help keep more of the revenue generated by the city's robust growth within the city, said Cate Manley, president and CEO of the Apopka Area Chamber of Commerce.

"We have multiple, significant construction trades that are doing a lot of work in Orlando and the surrounding area — but not very much work in Apopka."

Benge, who is working on a \$70 million mixed-use project in the city's Kelly Park area, said a program like this could open projects up to talented tradespeople who normally might be limited in their ability to get involved because of the size of the bids, thus enhancing the project itself.

In addition, he said it is important for developers to be plugged into the communities in which they are investing.

"It's important that we look at everything in a comprehensive manner. One thing the chamber has been very good about is bringing the needs of Apopka to the attention of the development community," Benge said. "Nowadays it takes more than just sticks and bricks to make a successful development."

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**Steven Ryzewski**

Staff Writer - *Orlando Business Journal*

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