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Hiring Local

City Build aims to train SF residents for jobs at publicly funded construction projects

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Back in 2004, when contractors working for the city of San Francisco started building Muni's Third Street light-rail line through Bayview-Hunters Point, the city's transportation authority asked the Board of Supervisors for money to fund a program to train local residents for jobs on the construction site.

That struck Greg Asay, an aide to Sup. Sophie Maxwell, as a bit odd. "We asked, why would Muni be responsible for job training? That's not their job."

The problem, as it turned out, was that job training for the massive public-works operation – and for other city-funded projects – wasn't really anyone's job. Each department was directing its own training programs; public money was going all over the city, with no coherent planning.

"There were just arrows all over the page," Asay says.

So Maxwell, who represents Bayview, Hunters Point, and Potrero Hill, began working on what would become City Build, a comprehensive job-training program aimed at giving local residents the skills they need to work on city-funded projects.

A collaboration between Maxwell and the Mayor's Office of Economic and Workforce Development, City Build is designed to make sure the hundreds of millions in taxpayer dollars that are going to rebuild the city's infrastructure also help unemployed San Franciscans get a paycheck.

City Build director Chris Iglesias describes the program's greatest asset as its ability to insist on specific employment practices on publicly funded projects. "We have the leverage of public money to create job opportunities," he says. "This is the public sector – we have influence here."

City Build operates on several levels. First, it tries to identify "job-ready" but unemployed city residents and direct them to openings on city construction projects like Muni's expansion and the Laguna Honda Hospital. Second, the program promotes and monitors hiring goals for contractors employed by the city.

In the past, a lot of contractors hired largely out-of-town labor for local projects. Now City Build pushes departments to demand that at least half of any contractor's new workers come from San Francisco. City Build monitors their compliance through a Web-

based payroll-reporting system, as well as staffers (a project and labor-tracking analyst and a client-tracking clerk).

Third, and potentially most important, is the creation of the City Build Academy, an on-site job training facility where, starting this month, free classes will be offered to prepare workers for local construction projects. Modeled after a successful program in Oakland called the Cypress-Mandela Training Center, the academy is located at City College's Evans Campus in the Bayview. Classes run between 14 and 16 weeks, and the Regional Council of Carpenters is providing unionized instructors.

The academy is still in the pilot phase; the first session starts later this month, with room for 75 people. If all goes well, supporters hope to see three more pilot sessions – and ultimately, an ongoing program that's a permanent addition to the city's repertoire of employment services.

Although classes are free, there are some strict entrance requirements. Applicants need a high school diploma or GED, must pass a drug test, and must have a driver's license by the time they finish the program. Unfortunately there's no stipend, so only those who can afford not to work during the day for as long as four months can participate. And since the classes are only offered in English, non-English-speaking residents won't make it through the first sessions.

However, Iglesias notes that the academy's City College location will be a boon. "We'll be able to identify what people need," he says, "and if it's ESL classes, they can take them right there."

With the disappearance of shop classes from schools, City Build has been working with the Unified School District to forge a new method for graduating seniors to find trade jobs. The mission is not just to provide young people with paid hours, but rather to train city residents for careers and put them in a position to get decent-paying, permanent union jobs.

It hasn't been easy, but the program is making progress. "There are so many different stakeholders here," Asay points out. "And change is hard, especially when there's money on the table. We're asking [contractors] to do something different, and already it's working pretty well."

Mayor Gavin Newsom has already received requests to start similar programs in other fields, like biotechnology, and contractors from the private sector are now approaching City Build about collaborating.