

Accelerate

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Committed to Those Who Build the Country “From the Ground Up”: Secretary LaHood Addresses the 18th Annual Transportation Braintrust

On September 16, the COMTO National Board of Directors, Council of Chapter Presidents and COMTO members—along with members from other stakeholder groups, including the Airport Minority Advisory Council and National Association of Minority Contractors—gathered at the Washington, DC Convention Center to participate in COMTO’s 18th Annual Transportation Braintrust at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation conference. Hosted by Congressman **Elijah Cummings** (Md.-7th) and featuring Transportation Secretary **Ray LaHood** as the keynote speaker, the event focused on the theme “Jobs and Small Business Participation: Opportunities for Inclusion and DBE Participation on Federally Funded Transportation Projects.”



The Honorable Elijah E. Cummings, US Congress, Maryland, 7th District



The Honorable Raymond LaHood, Secretary, US Department of Transportation

ners in this [recovery]. That’s why we’re here. We want to build that partnership with you to be successful.”

To do this, Secretary LaHood said the administration is committed to addressing their concerns: “We know that you want more tools to level the playing field. You want us to remove barriers to success. You want states and federal agencies to treat you as valued partners.”

He then detailed how

Where We Are

This year’s Braintrust was a manifestation of COMTO’s goal to increase procurement opportunities for minority- and women-owned businesses. In his remarks, Secretary LaHood acknowledged COMTO for being “a good conscience for us and reminding us of what we need to do.” He added that the administration wants COMTO and DBEs “to be our part-



CBCF / COMTO Keynote Speaker, The Honorable Raymond LaHood and Official Host, The Honorable Elijah Cummings



The Honorable Brandon Neal, Director, Office of Small & Disadvantaged Business Utilization, US Department of Transportation

the Department of Transportation is working toward this: by raising the net worth of participants in DBE contracts from \$750,000 to \$1.3 million and ensuring funds from the Recovery Act are going to DBEs (\$752 million of \$26 billion in new lending has gone to small and disadvantaged businesses). He also cited President Obama's Labor

Day announcement of an initiative to spend \$50 billion over the next six years to repair 150,000 miles of highways and to build more railways and a smart air traffic control system, among other transportation projects. "We're committed to investing in those who build the country from the ground up," LaHood said. "We know there's more to do and the economy is still fragile, but we're heading in the right direction."

This echoed the earlier comments of Congressman Cummings, who told attendees, "We want to make sure that when all the dust settles, checks are cashed by minority- and women-owned businesses."

Brandon Neal, Director of the Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization for the Department of Transportation, discussed DOT's notice of proposed rule-making regarding DBEs. The



Mr. Lester Woods, Jr., Director External Civil Rights, Missouri DOT and 2nd Vice Chair of the COMTO Board of Directors

comment period ended in July, with the department receiving more than 160 comments from individuals, members of Congress and organizations, including COMTO, which advocated for national reciprocity so DBEs don't have to get recertified with every transit authority, fairness in bonding requirements, workforce diversity and the unbundling of large contracts.

Neal said the new rules are expected to be approved in the next few months and should enhance DBE participation by requiring greater transparency and accountability.

Where We Need to Be

The event also featured a panel of state DOT leaders moderated by **Camille Hazeur**, Director of the Departmental Office of Civil Rights.

Panelist **Lester Woods, Jr.**, Director of External

Civil Rights for the Missouri DOT, shared with attendees the success of the I-64 project which,



Camille Hazeur, Director, Departmental Office of Civil Rights, US Department of Transportation

with the leadership of COMTO, brought together community stakeholders to ensure minority workforce goals were met using people from the community. The \$550 million project came in \$11 million under budget and three weeks ahead of schedule while exceeding



Mr. Warren Whitlock, Director Office of Civil Rights, New York State Department of Transportation

the minority workforce goal of 16 percent.

Woods said the lesson to come out of the I-64 project for DBEs is: "Show up. Speak up. And step up." He said DBEs have to be prepared to bid on the projects and "be responsible for the opportunities given to you."

This was reiterated by **Warren Whitlock**, Director of Civil Rights for the New York State DOT, who offered this advice to DBE owners: "You have to be in the game and be aggressive. You've got to know how to play. Your work is your calling card. No one is going to give you something just because of who you are." He added that in the last 18 months, his state has seen a 60 percent increase in certifications. Last year, \$435 million in contracts were awarded to DBEs. But he

pointed out that there's room for improvement: Of the state's 450 certified DBEs, the state awards contracts to about 25 percent of them. "We have to create opportunities for those other DBEs," he said. "We can't use the same people over and over again. We have to build a big tent."

Grindly Johnson, Chief of Administration for Virginia DOT, also talked about the importance of DBEs being prepared for all aspects of the work when they receive a contract: "Even if you can do the work, you still need to do payroll. You need to do insurance and succession planning." But states can help with this. In Virginia, "we find the DBE firm. We vet them. We help them do the proposal. We help them do the bid. We monitor technical services and back office services." This,



The Honorable Laura Richardson, US Congress, California, 37th District

she said, helps set the DBEs up for success—something more states need to take an active role in doing.

Albert Martin, Deputy Commissioner for the Connecticut DOT, admitted that his state "has not yet done anywhere near what could and should have been done to increase participa-

tion of DBEs in the construction of our transportation systems." But, he said, that's going to change: "We're committed to making sure there's participation at all levels of the system as we move forward."

He discussed the importance of "effective, efficient intermodal transportation" to help address a number of issues facing the country, including dependency on foreign sources of energy, congestion on the roadways, the struggling economy and high emissions—and the integral role DBEs can play. "It's incumbent on us to partner with you to make sure your participation takes places and that it is meaningful and significant," Martin said.

Woods of Missouri added that agencies have to get creative when it comes to enforcement and



Robert Prince, Jr., Cheryl McKissack, Venkat Subramanian, Warren Montague, Lester Woods, Jr., Julie Cunningham, Sec. Raymond LaHood, Shirley A. DeLibero, Roosevelt Bradley, Renee Edwards, and Michael Blaylock, CEO of Jacksonville Transit Authority

compliance. “What we see is that more [state DBE program] goals are being met with non-minority, women-owned companies. There needs to be more creativity within agencies. We can’t break the rules, but we can be creative within the rules.”

It Starts at the Top

All panelists agreed that support from the upper tiers of government is critical to the success of DBE programs. **Bartlett** of Maryland credited his state’s success (in FY 2009, the state awarded \$1.65 billion in contracts to minority firms) to the commitment of Maryland’s governor, who has set a DBE goal of 25 percent. “Why it works so well in Maryland is



Mr. Harold Bartlett, Deputy Secretary, Maryland Department of Transportation

because we have a governor who is very committed to this,” Bartlett said. “It’s on everyone’s minds that this program *has* to be successful.”

Whitlock from New York seconded this, noting that, in July, his governor signed “the most

aggressive minority- and women-owned business initiative in the country.” Johnson said that Virginia is also lucky enough to have the support of not just the governor, but the transportation commissioner and their FHWA counterpart. This, she said, has made all the difference. “For the last four years, I’ve had the backing of the government... We have great programs and we know how to execute those programs.”

The importance of commitment from leadership is why, panelists said, DBEs need to do what Woods of MODOT stated earlier: “Show up. Speak up. And step up.” It is only in making the case for DBEs to state’s leaders that change will occur and more contracts will be awarded to minority- and

women-owned businesses. As Congressman Cummings said when he closed out the meeting, “We have to be careful that we don’t mistake a comma for a period. We can always get better and grow and achieve even more.”



Mr. Warren Montague, COMTO Board of Directors provided closing remarks.



Mr. Al Martin, Deputy Commissioner, Connecticut DOT, Ms. Grindly Johnson, Chief of Administration, Virginia DOT, Mr. Warren Whitlock, Director Office of Civil Rights, New York State DOT, The Honorable Elijah Cummings, US Congress, Maryland, 7th District, Mr. Harold Bartlett, Deputy Secretary, Maryland DOT, The Honorable Camille Hazeur, Director, Departmental Office of Civil Rights, US Department of Transportation, Mr. Lester Woods, Jr., Director External Civil Rights, Missouri DOT

Creating a Dialogue

Response to this year's Braintrust was overwhelmingly positive, with attendees and participants alike seeing it as an important learning opportunity for both DBEs and those working for federal and state agencies. "We wanted to give DBE owners the chance to hear what those who are involved with these big federal contracts have to say about increasing their participation," said **Julie Cunningham**, CEO of COMTO. "The only way

it's going to improve is if all the stakeholders are at the same table and listening to one another. This provided a forum for them to do that."

Warren Montague, COMTO National Board Member At-Large, concurred: "We have to create a dialogue between all the different parties if we're going to see DBEs winning the big contracts," he said. "This Braintrust was an important part of that conversation. Now we all need to keep it going."



Mr. Roosevelt Bradley, National Chair of COMTO Board of Directors and Ms. Shirley A. DeLibero, Immediate Past Chair

Take-home Messages

What messages from the Braintrust will attendees take back to their states and businesses?

For **Cheryl McKissack**, CEO of the construction management firm McKissack & McKissack and a member of the COMTO National Board, it was evidence of leadership from the upper echelons of government that most impressed her. "To see this level of consciousness around DBE issues is just amazing," she said. "It's finally penetrating the highest levels of the country. The president is committed to this. That's why Secretary LaHood is here....Now that commitment has to trickle down to the engineers and others [who are involved in the big transportation projects]. They'll do what they're mandated to do."

Don O'Bannon, Vice President of Business Diversity and Development for Dallas/Ft. Worth International Airport and the National Chair of the Airport Minority Advisory Council (one of COMTO's collaborative partners), said what he took away from the Braintrust was the potential for the MODOT model for the I-64 project to be replicated. "DFW is undergoing a major renovation, spending \$1.7 billion over the next seven years," he said. "I want to find out what I can transport to my neck of the woods."



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COMTO Vision Statement

To see the diverse faces of America equally reflected in all levels of the transportation industry – (Resolution adopted May 8, 2007)

COMTO Mission Statement

To ensure a level playing field and maximum participation in the transportation industry for minority individuals, businesses, and communities of color through advocacy, information sharing, training, educational and professional development.

COMTO Core Values

COMTO's core values are embodied in how we conduct business and how we interact with our stakeholders, including our members, customers, partners and supporters. We affirm and are committed to the following core values: Advocacy, Diversity, Excellence, Inclusion, Innovation, Integrity, and Service.

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