

THINK: INFRASTRUCTURE FORUM Executive Summary | February 21, 2020

Diversity: The power to move Chicago forward

There is no argument that diversity, equity and inclusion make Chicago communities, businesses and governments stronger. Different backgrounds, experience and perspectives move conversations in new directions that spark the very ideas required for innovation in any field. Our differences make us stronger and benefit everyone when intentional about embracing them.

On Feb. 21, 2020, HNTB Corporation's THINK: Infrastructure Forum brought the region's transportation, engineering, nonprofit and academic communities together to discuss candidly the state of diversity, equity and inclusion in Chicago's transportation community and how to advance it. Key takeaways from the event:

Relevant vs. Direct Experience: Small, minority and women-owned firms need more direct experience leading and managing the region's infrastructure projects, not just "relevant" experience that comes with subcontracting to primes. As subcontractors, minority firms are not at the leadership table with the project owner. Without that seat, minority firms miss the leadership experience that project owners require as a prerequisite for large, complex infrastructure jobs. It hinders minority firms' ability to grow, create jobs and offer new services. Infrastructure stakeholders should collaborate on new paths to direct project leadership experience for minority- and women-owned firms.

Equity does not mean Equal: Equity is about creating fairness, not treating everyone the same. Minorities and women often earn their educations and careers battling challenges that other populations do not face. Equity means meeting minorities and women where they are and providing additional support and opportunity that others may not need. Greater equity addresses the unfairness inherent in uncontrollable circumstance, such as one's race or ZIP code, and moves toward a future that is more fair.

Purposeful Intention: All transportation stakeholders can be more intentional in their advancement of diversity, equity and inclusion in the industry and across the region. Business, government and academic communities, for example, can support existing programs or create new ones that expose minority students to transportation career paths, which should be viewed much more broadly than STEM-based positions. (Airports, transit agencies, departments of transportation and engineering firms all hire planners, economists, communicators, marketers and more to run their operations, not just engineers.) Leaders can ensure that minorities and women are represented on every project team to provide that direct experience and benefit from the diversity of ideas that come from diverse teams. They also can pay the costs of doing business, such as printing, events, catering, accounting and other professional services, to minority or women-owned firms, helping them grow.

Intentional actions like these demonstrate that diversity, equity and inclusion are priorities. "It's a lifestyle change we need to make," said one participant.

Think Differently, Boldly: Programs like set-aside contracts and disadvantaged business enterprise requirements emerged with good intentions, but also unintended consequences. They often cap the growth of small-, minority- or woman-owned firms by preventing access to the direct experience necessary for growth and relegate talented firms to secondary roles. Further collaboration between primes, subcontractors and project owners to think differently about procurement rules can create a new, more equitable system that fosters competition and growth.

The Conversation Should Continue: The THINK: Infrastructure Forum brought together a distinguished group of transportation stakeholders and started an important conversation. Let's continue it. Working together, we can advance diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives that strengthen our city, improve its mobility and create more opportunity for its citizens.

Event host:

- Mark Becherer - Chicago Office Leader, HNTB Corp.

Moderator:

- Karen Freeman-Wilson, President and CEO, Chicago Urban League

Panelists:

- John Clark, Chair, Airport Minority Advisory Council
- Felicia Davis, President and CEO, Chicago Urban League
- Juan Salgado, Chancellor, City Colleges of Chicago
- Kimberly Slaughter, Senior Vice President and Senior National Practice Consultant, HNTB Corp.

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From left to right: Mark Becherer, HNTB, Kim Slaughter, HNTB, Karen Freeman-Wilson, Chicago Urban League, Felicia Davis, Chicago Foundation for Women, Juan Salgado, City Colleges of Chicago, John Clark, Airport Minority Advisory Council, Chris Gale, HNTB.