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A new deal for Orlando

How the venues projects will put people to work

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Regina Hill knows all about the promises of jobs for the Parramore community that were made when Orlando's current basketball arena was built nearly 20 years ago.

Supporters of the Orlando Arena -- now called the Amway Arena -- said it would bring economic opportunity to the hardscrabble neighborhood. But most residents ended up with nothing; Hill was one of the few who did land a job -- as a server, bringing food to patrons sitting in skyboxes.

This time, Orlando officials say they are intent on keeping their latest promise.

City officials see the construction of a new arena, performing-arts center and renovated Citrus Bowl -- the largest public-works project in Central Florida history -- as a means to create jobs in tough times, much as President Franklin Roosevelt's Depression-era programs put millions of unemployed Americans to work on bridges, roads and other public projects.

For Hill, it couldn't come at a better time. She now heads her own small construction company, and plans to bid on arena work that would allow her business to grow at a time when others are facing bankruptcy.

"I personally know some subcontractors who haven't worked in a year," Hill said. "This will get people back on their feet."

The city's plan, called The Blueprint, was developed by staffers with guidance from Mayor Buddy Dyer and Commissioner Daisy Lynam, whose district includes some of the poorest areas

of the city. It seeks to guarantee work for minority-owned businesses and reach out to impoverished people who are traditionally the hardest to employ.

First, the prime contractors for each of the venues have been required to partner with local and minority-owned companies. Arizona-based Hunt Construction, which completes an average of \$2 billion in work a year, teamed with four local companies to land the job of building Orlando's new arena.

Most contracts have yet to be issued. But when they are, 18 percent of the work must go to minority-owned firms and 6 percent to women-owned firms. For example, while the \$20 million contract to design the arena went to a nationally known stadium-architecture firm, more than \$6 million of the work is being handled by local companies owned by women and minorities.

Carl Kelly is one of those -- he landed a \$73,000 deal to design the landscaping and irrigation around the arena.

"It's the largest contract that I'll be working on this year," the landscape architect said. "If it wasn't for the events center, with the drop-off in residential work I'd really be hurting right now."

The other half of The Blueprint focuses on putting unemployed people to work building the venues, which will take thousands of laborers about four years to complete. The plan is meant to recruit jobless individuals, train them if necessary and route them to the construction companies that will do the hiring.

"Don't look at this as a social program. This is hard-core economic development. We're trying to provide jobs," said Kevin Edmonds, a city administrator helping to coordinate the effort.

The city has given \$25,000 grants to four community organizations to round up potential workers and help them clear barriers they might face, such as transportation and child care. Those groups refer them to Workforce Central Florida, a federally funded job-placement agency that is supposed to match available workers with venues job openings.

Workforce Central Florida is also steering interested workers into training programs; the first construction class starts next week.

"This is going to open up a lot of doors for me," said Anthony Jones, an unemployed worker who will be in the first class. "One day, I want to open my own business."

Groups that run other training programs, such as trade-union apprenticeships and construction classes at the Orange County Jail, also have been told about the venues jobs.

Even so, the training provisions have become an issue.

From the beginning, city officials have wanted to train as many workers as possible, hoping it would lead to career-path jobs rather than simple unskilled labor. But unemployment has doubled in the three years since The Blueprint was written, and there are now plenty of already-trained construction workers looking for work. Workforce Central Florida President Gary Earl said it doesn't make sense to spend limited resources to create a bigger glut of unemployed trained workers.

"There will be some [people placed in training], but not as many as there would be if the economy were strong and there weren't a labor surplus," Earl said.

There is also resentment from some groups in the African-American community, particularly the Metropolitan Orlando Urban League, whose president wanted a piece of the job-training work that went to Workforce Central Florida.

City officials said more money is expected to be earmarked for training next month, though it's not clear how much or what organizations would be funded.

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