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## Women, minorities play big role in building new Orlando Magic arena

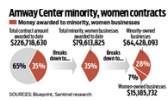
The construction milestone is an apparent nationwide record, Magic and Orlando say

Mark Schluab  
Sentinel Staff Writer  
August 26, 2009



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Six months ago, Rick Ruich was walking out of the Orange County Jail, done serving his time for drunken driving. Mario McCrary was jobless, his unemployment benefits about to run out. Barry Beckett hadn't been able to find a job in three months.

All three men are now among the approximately 400 workers building the **Orlando Magic's** new **Amway** Center, including many who had been homeless, ex-convicts, residents of the downtrodden Parramore neighborhood or all of the above.

Just more than a year into construction of the \$480 million center, Mayor **Buddy Dyer** and Magic executives point to guys like Ruich, McCrary and Beckett as living symbols of the project's impact on Orlando's economy amid a national recession.

On Tuesday, Dyer also touted another economic milestone: Thirty-five percent of the Amway Center construction contracts awarded so far have gone to businesses owned by minorities or women — an apparent nationwide record, according to the city and the Magic.

"We are setting new benchmarks for professional sports facilities that have never been reached before," said **Alex Martins**, chief operating officer for the Magic.

By comparison, the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts in Miami awarded 15 percent. For **Florida A&M University** law school in Orlando, a historically black college, the number was 24 percent.

For Dyer and the Magic, it's an important distinction. They won support for the venue in part with the promise that it would bring jobs and contracts to minority-owned businesses and residents of Paramore, who were largely ignored when the city's current arena was built.

Led by Orlando Commissioner Daisy Lynum, they put together a plan that guarantees that at least 18 percent of the contracts are awarded to companies owned by minorities, and another 6 percent to those owned by women. Many cities, counties and states offer contract preference for minority-owned businesses, but few, if any, have made it such a key element of a project.

Large, national companies that bid on the arena job were urged to partner with and mentor smaller minority firms. Trade contracts were broken into pieces, so the work can be shared by multiple contractors.

### Company may grow

So far, Amway Center, which is scheduled to be completed in September 2010, has far exceeded the contracting goal. With three-quarters of the contracts awarded, 9.8 percent have gone to Hispanic firms and 9.2 percent have gone to African-American companies.

Another 7 percent have been awarded to companies owned by women, including Merit Fasteners Corp., a Longwood company owned by Donna Best and her sisters. Winning the \$250,000 contract to supply every nut and bolt in the arena saved the business from another round of layoffs, Best said. The project also has brought connections that may allow the company to grow; Merit Fasteners is now bidding on the new Florida Marlins ballpark in Miami.

"The value is tenfold because of all the opportunities we're getting because of this project," Best said.

The success of the arena's job-creation efforts, however, has been mixed. In 2006, while pushing for the new arena, supporters cited an economic study by the Metro Orlando Economic Development Commission that predicted its construction would create 4,100 jobs.

It's hard to say exactly how many jobs have actually materialized at construction companies, suppliers and other businesses that serve them, but it's likely far short of that prediction.

The city initially partnered with Workforce Central Florida to run a job-placement office for the venues, but few applicants left with jobs. By all accounts, the jobs office has had more success since it was taken over by city staffers.

"I was unemployed, and it's been a real blessing," said McCrary, who landed a job as a mason. "You have to be

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qualified. There's been a lot of turnover because people have been hired who aren't qualified."

### 'Target population'

The city has placed 152 people in jobs at the Amway Center construction site so far, with 85 from the "target population" of west Orlando residents, the homeless and ex-offenders. The city has helped place far more applicants — 818 — in jobs unrelated to the arena.

"We've had a few bumps in the road, I'll concede, because we're trying to do something nobody else in the United States has done," Dyer said.

The **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** picketed outside **Amway Arena** during the **NBA**

playoffs, saying the Magic had "broken promises" because more valuable contracts had gone to Hispanic companies than black companies. Records released by the city still show Hispanic firms have received bigger contracts, though the gap has narrowed.

### Watching closely

On Tuesday, the Rev. Randolph Bracy, NAACP branch president, said the new numbers are encouraging, but the group plans to review the contracts. "I've seen some cosmetic things that suggest they've done better," Bracy said. "We'll be the first to applaud them if they've made a demonstrative impact."

Mark Schlueb can be reached at [mschlueb@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:mschlueb@orlandosentinel.com) or 407-420-5417.

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The economy will bounce back. Government spending created many jobs in the Great Depression, Hoover Dam for example. Some paint that as socialism, others as a wise public investment -- found a cool site; Balkingpoints ; incredible satellite view of earth  
*MikeW67 (08/26/2009, 1:48 PM )*

Why not contracts & employment on merit. The government is broke they need to stop all this race crap. But the contracts out to bid stop the race crap it is BS  
*reason7 (08/26/2009, 1:41 PM )*

WOW ... what ugly remarks. 65% of the contracts go specifically to white males and another 4% to white women, and this is reverse racism??? What a truly ignorant remark! 69% of the contracts for this building have gone to white owned business, and all you white guys care about is the 31% going to blacks and hispanics. Greedy b@stards!  
*DeliveryGuy (08/26/2009, 12:40 PM )*

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