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## Officials announce details of plan to encourage minorities in engineering

Springfield-based engineering firm Hanson Professional Services hired about 15 interns in 2013, but the company didn't receive a single application from a minority student in Springfield or the surrounding area, Sergio Pecori, the company's president and CEO, said Monday.

"To my knowledge, we haven't had those candidates present themselves in the past," Pecori said, surrounded by public officials at a news conference in the Springfield City Council chamber.

Addressing that issue is one of the goals of the "minority participation plan" officials announced at the event.

Through the program — a partnership among the city, Sangamon County and Hanson — a dozen minority students in middle school through college will be selected for mentoring, educational opportunities, job training and possible internships to encourage them to pursue careers in engineering and related fields. The plan is designed to tie in with the ongoing work to relocate freight train traffic from Third Street to the 10th Street corridor.

The city council and the county board unanimously approved the plan earlier this month. The two-year pilot project will cost \$60,000 a year, with the city, county and Hanson each contributing \$20,000. Hanson will manage the program and provide updates.

"The minority participation plan has been developed because of our collective concern of increasing minority participation in the workforce and is intended to be a continuing program for years to come," Mayor Mike Houston said.

### 'An opportunity'

One of the first steps will be for Hanson to organize a workshop with local minority organizations and the Springfield School District to identify potential candidates.

Once they are selected, Hanson will meet with the students individually and help them apply for opportunities such as the Springfield Black Chamber of Commerce's Summer Youth Initiative, which pairs students with local businesses to gain job experience, and the Illinois Department of Transportation's Highway Construction Careers Training Program, which works with community colleges to provide training for minorities and women in skills related to highway construction.

There will be continued follow-up and mentoring throughout the process, officials said.

Three students each year will be selected for full-time, paid summer internships with Hanson, which has a history of hiring former interns once they've finished school, Pecori said.

The plan also will involve close collaboration with the National University Rail Center, a joint effort of seven universities that's based at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

For example, Hanson will work with the center to identify minority high school students to participate in a weeklong summer program for rail and intermodal transportation at Michigan Technological University.

"We're very pleased that right here in our own backyard ... is an opportunity to work with the city and Hanson and the other organizations associated with this to advance this program," said Christopher Barkan, the center's director.

The plan "specifically is in line with one of the objectives of the NURail Center," which is to encourage women and minorities to be involved in "the very exciting opportunities for engineers today," he said.

"Whether it's in rail or any other engineering discipline, it's a really great time to be pursuing careers in that area," Barkan added.

### Diversifying the mix

Sangamon County Board Chairman Andy Van Meter praised the plan as "a good demonstration of what we can accomplish if we work together modestly to achieve a goal."

"When we began the effort to consolidate rail on 10th Street, we said that all corners of our community would benefit from this consolidation, and this is a small initial step toward keeping that promise," Van Meter said.

Ward 2 Ald. Gail Simpson said the plan will help minority students establish the network of connections that can lead to careers in engineering.

"Not enough minority students think in terms of engineering as career options because it's ... simply not an area that is familiar to them," Simpson said. "Many pick professions like teaching, public safety, social work, some sports-related professions, simply because those are the people that they most experience growing up.

"This plan, I believe, is the first step in changing some of that," she continued. "That is not to say that those careers listed are not indeed noble professions. There are just not enough minority engineers in that mix."

Ward 3 Ald. Doris Turner said the plan will encourage talented students to think about pursuing engineering by exposing them to engineers "that look like them and have experienced the things that they have experienced along the way."

Ward 6 Ald. Cory Jobe, whose ward includes Hanson's headquarters, called the plan "a unique partnership that will bring long-lasting results to our community as the rail project begins to reshape the face of the capital city."

The plan also will help minority contractors navigate the process of applying to prequalify as "Disadvantaged Business Enterprises" with the Illinois Department of Transportation, which will help them bid for contracts to work on rail consolidation or the planned multimodal transportation center.

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