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New Orleans continues to examine fairness in contracting

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By **Fritz Esker**

Contributing Writer

The City of New Orleans is trying to figure where it falls short in awarding contracts to women- and minority-owned businesses. Soon, it will be one step closer to having an answer.

On October 5, the City of New Orleans will hold two public meetings and is inviting businesses and residents to join the discussion to help provide input for a disparity study being produced to figure out what percentage of women- and minority-owned businesses have access to city contracts.

The meetings will be from 3:30 to 5 p.m. and 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the Training, Resource, and Assistive Technology Center at the Oliver St. Pe' Center, Room 101 on the University of New Orleans campus. At the meetings, participants will be welcome to share their thoughts and experiences about whether

or not they feel women- and minority-owned businesses get equal opportunities to obtain city contracts.

The study was commissioned by the City of New Orleans. The meetings were originally scheduled for August 30, but were rescheduled due to Hurricane Harvey. Keen Independent Research is conducting the study, of which the public meetings play a vital role. They have already conducted thousands of telephone surveys with business owners. One-on-one in-owners will also be conducted.

“The public meetings and surveys are critical components of our research process,” said David Keen, principal of Keen Independent Research. “It is imperative to hear directly from business owners about their experiences in the New Orleans marketplace.”

The study began in January 2017. It will analyze construction, professional services, goods and other service contracts awarded by the city between 2012 and 2016. Keen Independent Research expects to present preliminary results either at the end of this year or early next year, followed by a final report. After the report is issued, Keen will call another set of public meetings to hear from business owners on how they feel about the findings and what can be done to improve the state of women and minority-owned businesses going forward.

“We would like to get public input on a solution after we publish the study,” Keen said.

But for the results to matter, Keen needs people to participate. He emphasized that the public meetings are open to all.

“We’re really looking to hear from anybody and everybody,” Keen said. “We’re not just looking for one business or one type of business.”

Ultimately, the city wants to learn where the contracts (and the money from those contracts) are going: What percentage of businesses applying for those contracts are owned by women or minorities, and, of that percentage, how many are being awarded city contracts.

George White, the owner of GWJ Construction & Supply in New Orleans East, feels that minority-owned business are at a disadvantage in securing city contracts. He feels the market is dominated by a few businesses and it’s hard for minority-owned businesses to break through. He said the city seems to stick with a few companies they know instead of trying new contractors.

“A lot of jobs seem to go to the same people over and over again,” White said.

Anyone who wants to participate in the study should visit the website at noladisparitystudy.com or make contact via phone or email at (504)603-0017 or NOLADisparityStudy@keenindependent.com.

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