

Columbia Basin Trust Task Force on Construction – Scoping Session
Submission by Ruth Beck, Employment Equity Project Coordinator,
West Kootenay Women's Association – February, 2001.

This input comes from two years of monitoring the implementation of equity on major construction projects in the West Kootenays as well as networking, researching, strategizing and advocating for employment equity in the region.

The Task Force's two areas of focus, training/apprenticeship and economic development, are closely linked. Economic development and demographic trends provide the context within which the demand for training and apprenticeship emerges. The supply of training and apprenticeships contribute qualified workers to the workforce, which furthers economic development. In addition, when training is provided locally, it provides direct employment and capacity development for the training institution. Implementing apprenticeships also enhances the (transferable) supervisory skills of journey level tradespeople, crew leaders and so on.

Economic Development

In BC, up to 40% of the construction workforce is expected to retire within 5 – 10 years. In some trades, the shortages are already visible. In the West Kootenays, major industry players such as Cominco, Celgar and the Columbia Power Corporation/Columbia Basin Trust partnership face high rates of workforce turnover in process operators and many construction/industrial trades. Cominco alone expects 350 retirements by process operators and 100 by journey level tradespeople in the next 5 to 10 years.

At the same time, the region has the opportunity to benefit significantly from Columbia Basin Power Projects representing multi-million dollar investments in the region over at least a 10-year period. The Power Projects provide economic development benefits in terms of employment, contracting, purchase of locally-supplied goods and services, infrastructure improvements, and skills and capacity development.

The question of how to meet the expected regional needs for industrial and construction workers is a key regional economic development issue. Where will our next generation of construction workers come from? How can our educational and economic leaders/institutions support a regional solution to a regional labour market issue? How can we encourage women and men, young women and young men, from our communities to choose careers in trades, industrial and technical work?

In order for local residents to choose a career in construction it needs to be attractive to them – this means access to satisfying work, a living wage and a respectful work environment. At present, construction doesn't offer access to careers in an equitable manner to all members of the available or potential workforce. This means that the economic development benefits of construction are not fairly distributed in society. It also means that resolving equity issues will be important to the future of the industry. Occupational segregation isn't unique to construction but it is proving to be a particularly resistant sector to accepting women and other traditionally underrepresented groups.

The West Kootenay Women's Association and Kootenay WITT can speak primarily about the experience of women. Historically, women interested in a career in

construction have faced barriers at all stages of the process. Today, some of the barriers include relative difficulty gaining apprenticeships or employment, difficulty getting support from unions, inappropriate assumptions about the requirements (e.g. physical strength etc.) of some work, negative or paternalistic attitudes, resistant or hostile behavior, discouragement, disrespect and isolation. These barriers have become embedded in the systems for training, apprenticeship and construction employment.

The Columbia Basin Hydro Projects are trying to address these barriers in some ways. The collective agreement on the Arrow Lakes Generating Station acknowledges equity issues as a workplace priority. According to the agreement, the parties agree to set out equity targets and then give equity hire precedence over other forms of preferential hiring, in order to meet and exceed those targets. Another clause states that training will be made available to enable equity groups to compete effectively for employment. This acknowledges that some of the historical barriers have resulted in equity groups needing pro-active skills development to compete on an equal footing for jobs.

In addition to the collective agreement, there are supportive individuals in the Columbia Power Corporation who have played leadership roles in fostering excellent community relations and investment in equity issues. Local MLAs have been extremely supportive as well. More people are involved in finding positive solutions to equity, but it's a slow process and we're at an early stage in terms of momentum.

The past two years of involvement with this project have demonstrated that equity needs pro-active facilitation by equity group representatives and industry/labour/education leaders who have the authority, responsibility, skills and honest motivation to make the construction industry equitable. Promoting equity in construction in the West Kootenays has felt like rolling a big rock uphill. If industry wants more women, this has to change. Construction trades will need to be as attractive to an interested woman with "the right stuff" as to a man. Among other things, this means getting rid of biased assumptions about what is "the right stuff" so that skilled, qualified women can expect equally rewarding work experiences and careers as men.

Our experience shows that a successful strategy will require money – to fund training programs and bursaries, to facilitate equitable access to apprenticeships, to coordinate information-sharing and problem-solving issues of equity integration, to ensure fair hiring and retention practices in the workplace, and to foster a workplace climate that encourages equity.

Training and Apprenticeship

The dominant perspective in education today focuses on transferable skills for high wage employment in the "new economy". This de-emphasizes opportunities available in trades and industrial work and makes it more difficult to address the predicted labour force shortages. There are a number of initiatives happening to increase awareness of careers in trades including BC Opportunities, ITAC and programs of the BC Federation of Labour, to name a few.

In order for trades awareness programs to be successful they need to address the economic incentives for considering a career in trades. This means understanding the economic context within which prospective workers are making their decisions.

Women earn on average 67% of what men earn working full-time, year-round in the West Kootenay Boundary¹. This means that, all other things being equal, women may have proportionately more to gain by investing in a career in trades, industrial or technical work compared with their other options. The same may be said for other traditionally underrepresented groups, such as First Nations, visible minorities and youth, particularly youth who are female, aboriginal or in a visible minority group.

Consequently, the regional economic development challenge posed by the upcoming construction workforce shortage may compel the industry to become more welcoming of women, First Nations and visible minorities. This will require a real change in attitude as well as pro-active, self-sustainable behavior by employers, educators, unions and others to reach out, recruit, train, hire, apprentice and retain workers who are different from the vast majority of the current workforce. This will require increased investment in trades training and labour force integration to reduce barriers for groups traditionally underrepresented in trades employment.

Selkirk College has submitted a proposal to ITAC and the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology for a Women in Trades and Technology course. This is a critical element in a regional equity integration strategy for the construction sector. A WITT course prepares women for a wide variety of trades, industrial and technical work and will help enable women to compete for trades employment.

Trades awareness and training programs are necessary elements of a construction strategy but, on their own, may not guarantee a timely, optimal workforce transition. As mentioned above, our experience shows that it will require a comprehensive, multi-faceted, well-resourced implementation strategy to achieve results. What might a successful strategy look like?

Strategies to Address Regional Economic Development Needs

We propose the following elements of a comprehensive strategy to strengthen the construction sector. We are also available to discuss, comment on, and support other ideas that are beneficial, mutually-reinforcing and cost-effective.

1. Securing funds to continue the Equity Coordinator position (currently a pilot project) for rest of the term of the Arrow Lakes Generating Station Project. The Equity Coordinator has been a key player in fostering cooperative attitudes and behavior to support equity integration on that project and, likely, beyond. There is a need to extend her contract to the end of that project.
2. Securing a corporate commitment and funding from the Columbia Power Corporation/Columbia Basin Trust partnership to ensure effective implementation of equity on the Brilliant Expansion Project and all future power projects.² This will

¹ Based on the 1996 Census. By the way, for BC, the average is 73%.

² Specifically, we expect to recommend: *(continues on next page)*

- Employment Equity Officer built into each contract's bidding process;
- Standard terms of reference for EEO positions based on recommendations from the Arrow Lakes Generating Station Pilot Project;
- Equity targets to be set in advance of commencement of construction and with paid equity expertise;

include new requirements for contractors to develop equity implementation programs with paid equity coordination and to provide funds to support training, particularly to enable equity groups to compete for employment.

3. Securing funds for a Regional Equity Integration Facilitator based out of Selkirk College to coordinate community development, information sharing, outreach, training access and labour force integration for equity groups to address industrial adjustment issues.³ This position is required to ensure that expertise is shared, problems are discussed and resolved, and that the labour force transition is as smooth and beneficial to local residents as possible. The equity facilitator can take on a wider role in promoting construction in general, working with all interested parties. The facilitator needs to be someone who is pro-actively committed to equity, who is realistic and positive, and who can see the “big picture”.
4. Securing funds for Selkirk College to offer a WITT Course on an annual basis to meet labour force demand. It is not in the region’s interest to force Selkirk College to have to roll a big rock uphill to get annualized funding for the WITT course. Collective advocacy could secure a long-term commitment from government.
5. Securing funds and a commitment from ITAC to use the Columbia Basin as a model with demonstration projects for equity and apprenticeship.

We would like to express our appreciation that the Columbia Basin Trust has convened a Task Force to address construction issues. We hope that the Trust will be a major catalyst and funding partner for implementation strategies that will benefit all Basin residents and have the support of regional stakeholders. We look forward to helping build a stable, equitable future for the construction industry in the Columbia Basin.

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- Training funding to be built into each contract’s bidding process, particularly to enable equity groups to compete effectively for employment;
 - Equity compliance by sub-contractors;
 - Resources within CPC to monitor equity, liaise with EEOs and network with other regional labour/equity/training initiatives.

³ Specifically, the role is intended to:

- Convene a community-based Equity Integration Committee with representatives of unions, industry, training partners, government, EEOs and equity groups. The purposes of the committee are to build a culture of support for equity through information sharing, problem solving, collective strategizing and decision-making related to equity integration in trades and technical areas in the region.
- Coordinate outreach to schools, youth centres, employment centres etc. to promote trades and technical occupations and training, particularly for traditionally underrepresented groups.
- Collaborate with and support complementary initiatives such as BC Opportunities, ITAC, the BC Federation of Labour and the Columbia Basin Trust Task Force on Construction for example.
- Support regional training opportunities by providing employment follow-up for graduates of WITT, trades and technical programs.
- Liaise with employers/contractors, ITAC, unions, EEOs etc. to facilitate equity integration into trades and technical work sites.
- Trouble-shoot equity, training and labour force issues, identify new opportunities and bring items to the attention of the Equity Integration Committee.