The Penn National Gaming is currently implementing a $400 million casino construction project in Central Ohio and it doesn't want minority businesses to be left out of the opportunity to compete for the contracts that must be awarded.

By IKE MGBATOGU

Contributing Writer

COLUMBUS – The Penn National Gaming is currently implementing a $400 million casino construction project in Central Ohio and it doesn't want minority businesses to be left out of the opportunity to compete for the contracts that must be awarded.

So, it brought in the Columbus Chapter of the NAACP to help and named the civil rights group its "Administrator for Diversity Inclusion." In this capacity, the NAACP is to help get the word out to minority businesses and vendors in Central Ohio informing them about these opportunities.

"Our responsibility is to ensure minority inclusion throughout the project," said Noel Williams,

president of the Columbus Chapter of the NAACP, in an interview with the Call & Post, last week. “We want to make sure that “minority businesses are given the opportunity to bid on these projects.”

“It’s about jobs,” said Williams.

Williams said that “economic growth and diversity inclusion for all minorities” is her top priority as the leader of the Columbus NAACP.

“We are very serious about minority inclusion, economic inclusion on this project. To have minority contractors in the construction project,” she said.

Apparently, Penn National Gaming is, too. And it demonstrated that by first hiring Smoot Construction Company, a minority firm based in Columbus, to manage the construction of the Hollywood Casino Columbus.

Groundbreaking is scheduled for this spring, with expected opening in mid 2012.

Smoot Construction CEO Lewis Smoot, Sr., reacted with glee.

“This opportunity is just fantastic – we are elated at Penn’s selection of Smoot Construction for this important project,” said Smoot, in a statement. “Two years ago, they promised that the opportunities for this project would go to the locals and they have delivered on that promise.”

Williams, who praised Penn’s commitment to economic diversity in Central Ohio, agreed.

“It is one of the promises they made to the NAACP and they are fulfilling it,” said Williams, of Penn National Gaming’s decision to hire a minority business as the lead contractor for the

project.

Williams said that her group's involvement with these projects will "meet the twin goals of ensuring equal opportunity and promoting diversity."

And the kind of diversity she is focusing on is "economic diversity," which she called the "third prong of the Civil Rights Movement."

She expressed the view that "economic diversity," which was a major focus of the Civil Rights Movement decades ago, has not been achieved yet, certainly not as much as the 'political' prong, where she said that minorities have made tremendous strides considering the growing number of minority officials occupying influential political offices, capped off two years ago with the historic election of Barack Obama as the nation's first Black president.

There's also the 'social' front, where she said that minorities are almost there. At least, we can "eat or live anywhere we want."

Most of the remaining work, noted Williams, is on the 'economic' front. There, "We have fallen short. We have not made the economic gains which we should and could have."

The NAACP is promoting these economic opportunities to minority groups, through radio campaign, community forums, eblast, and working with faith-based community groups.

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