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BUSINESS
1B

A Newspaper Activity Page For Young People
Kid Scoop.com
This Week: **Poison!**

SEE
2B

THE OBSERVER

FORECAST

Tonight 32 Tomorrow 48
DETAILS, PAGE 2A

Two Sections
14 Pages
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Alliance aims to increase numbers of minorities, women in highway construction trades

The Oregon Department of Transportation's Eastern Region is forming an active Regional Workforce Alliance designed to boost the numbers of minorities and women in the highway construction trades.

"Basically, we're coming to the region and saying we have jobs," said ODOT Diversity Manager Michael A. Cobb. "We're trying to determine how to get people ready, how to screen them and what kind of supportive services they need."

The Eastern Oregon Workforce Alliance is part of ODOT's Workforce Development Plan.

ODOT's plan aims to increase diversity in employment, increase apprenticeship participation and provide more training resources and opportunities for highway construction careers.

The local alliance is the second alliance to implement the Workforce

Development Plan at the local, Region 5 level. Earlier, an alliance was formed in ODOT's Region 1.

A first meeting was held Feb. 21 at Wildhorse Resort and Casino in Pendleton.

That session featured formal establishment of an alliance made up of representatives from state, county and city agencies; local service providers; women and minority groups; contractors; construction firms; and unions.

Among partners in the alliance are the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and Blue Mountain Community College, said Cobb.

Also during the initial meeting, a work group was formed to look at various local issues.

See ALLIANCE, 6B



Members of ODOT's Eastern Oregon Workforce Alliance convened in Pendleton in February to discuss ways to increase diversity in construction employment, increase apprenticeship participation and provide more training resources. The full alliance will meet again March 23.

Alliance: Shortage of qualified highway workers

Continued from 1B

"That group will analyze where the gaps are, what needs to be done, how exactly the alliance can help those people who are looking for work," Cobb said.

"The folks in the regions are the best ones to know, the best ones to help us form the alliances."

The group will begin working on ways to make the best use of existing programs to build a qualified labor pool for the growing number of highway construction jobs.

The Oregon Department of Transportation says that highway and bridge construction projects will reach record levels in the next seven to 10 years.

At the same time, Oregon is facing a shortage of qualified

highway workers at the apprentice and skilled journey levels.

The ultimate goal of the Workforce Development Plan is to provide Oregonians with the skills to maintain well-paid, sustainable careers, said Cobb.

The Workforce Development Plan implementation is a two-year pilot project.

During the initial phase, all Oregon Transportation Investment Act III projects statewide will use the new increased apprenticeship and training goals, and women and minority aspirational targets.

The new goals and targets also apply to all ODOT construction projects in Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties.

Following the two-year trial, and pending Federal Highway Administration approval, ODOT

will determine whether to include the new increased training goals and targets on all ODOT projects statewide.

The work group planned to meet today at BMCC in Pendleton.

The full alliance will meet

again March 23, 10 a.m. to

noon at Wildhorse Casino. To learn more about the Workforce Development Plan, visit http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/HWY/OTLA/bridge_delivery.shtml on the Web.