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Official says state will increase use of minority-, women-owned firms

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By Donald I. Hammonds, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

The Rendell administration vowed yesterday to push for more minority- and women-owned businesses to get a bigger share of the roughly \$5 billion to \$6 billion the state spends annually on goods and services.

General Services Secretary Donald T. Cunningham, in Pittsburgh yesterday, unveiled the administration's list of initiatives that he claimed would improve what he called Pennsylvania's "abysmal" track record when it comes to spending its money with women- and minority-owned businesses. As of last year, less than 2 percent of that spending went to those two groups, with women getting well over half that amount.

"We want to send the strongest possible signal that the state government is committed" to increasing its spending with those groups, Cunningham said at a news conference sponsored by the African-American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania. The conference was followed by a public hearing during which local business people discussed the initiatives.

One of the goals, Cunningham said, is to broaden opportunities for minority- and women-owned businesses, which for the most part get involved with only state construction contracts. The Rendell administration wants to extend that to contracts for other goods and services, in part by taking steps to increase the pool of qualified vendors and to streamline the process used to certify companies that do business with the state.

He also said that monitoring companies for compliance with minority- and women-owned participation would be increased. And he promised "strong action" would be taken against companies that did not comply.

The governor has set an overall goal of 10 percent of annual state spending going to certified minority- and women-owned vendors and

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companies during his administration, Cunningham said.

Cunningham said the state also planned to develop an "electronic marketplace" to make public what the state plans to purchase during a fiscal year and to notify certified vendors of upcoming contracts. He said this should help alleviate a common complaint -- that vendors often don't know what items the state plans to purchase and that companies don't know which minority and women vendors have been certified to do business with the state.

Cunningham also promised that the administration would take steps to make sure that those who did get certified for state business were truly run by minorities and women. "We don't want shell operations in the mix," he said, referring to the practice of some contractors of using minority partners as a front for what actually are firms controlled by white men.

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