

More business sought for minorities

By [Kim Leonard](#)
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Friday, December 2, 2005

Leaders of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania will try to double the amount of money that top local corporations spend with minority-owned businesses over the next three years.

Murry S. Gerber, president and CEO of Equitable Resources Inc., announced the program Thursday at the chamber's annual luncheon meeting at the Omni William Penn Hotel.

"This is an ambitious and exciting goal for AACC, but it is one that can be achieved and must be achieved," said Gerber, named chairman of the chamber's presidential roundtable last month.

Chamber officials don't know how much the top 25 public and privately owned companies in Western Pennsylvania's spend now with the region's 1,400 minority- and women-owned businesses.

But they will try to find out.

Gerber plans to form a council of chief executives from the biggest companies, and chamber President Doris Carson Williams then will work to determine each participant's corporate "spend."

"If it's \$1 million, we want to make it \$2 million over the next three years," Carson Williams said.

The 11-year-old chamber has other staff members assigned to membership growth and administrative tasks, and Carson Williams said she intends to focus on procurement. "I am going to help them to quietly grow their numbers," she said of the local companies.

Gerber's initiative is a move in the right direction, said James C. Cooper, a chamber member, president and owner of Homestead-based Sterling Contracting LLC, a general contractor with commercial projects in five states.

Equalizing business opportunities for minority-owned firms benefits everyone and makes a region stronger, Cooper said. "When you have a dynamic neighborhood, where everybody is out there competing and doing business -- that's the American way," he said.

Robert O. Agbede, the chamber's chairman for eight years, said while he loves Pittsburgh, as he travels across the country in his role as president and chief executive of Moon-based ATS Chester Engineers Inc., "We know we still have some work to do in this region."

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Still, "At least we are trying to better ourselves," Agbede said. He said he'd like to see a scorecard established for each company "so we know who is meeting the mark, and who is not."

The African American chamber began in 1994 as a volunteer organization, and Carson Williams opened its office in October 1998 in the Regional Enterprise Tower, Downtown. There currently are 486 members. The chamber runs a variety of programs, including a business institute that helps members and other minorities expand their business opportunities.

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