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Contractors Information Bureau

Service provides clearinghouse for construction-related data

BY PATTI CURRY
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When callers telephone the Contractors Information Bureau in Northeast Portland they may get a recorded message that tells them: "A little research now can save a lot of headaches later."

For contractors adrift in an ocean of bureaucracy data, that message — and the services behind it — can be a comforting port in the storm.

The CIB's Founder and President Ras Douglas describes the agency as a clearinghouse of public data.

Accessing the information is free, but Douglas also sells the data he gathers from various government agencies. Those agencies include Oregon's Workers' Compensation Division, the Bureau of Labor & Industries, the state Building Codes Division, the financial fraud division of the Department of Justice and the Construction Contractors Board.

Contractor members of the CIB include W.G. Moe & Sons Inc. and Baugh Construction Oregon Inc.

Baugh doesn't use the CIB's databases to get information but as a member company has a file on the agency's Web site. Sandee Gardner, a representative of Baugh's marketing department, said the information CIB provides gives the company additional exposure throughout the industry and the clearinghouse approach provides quick and easy access.

"It's all in one central location. . . . It's just another tool that somebody who doesn't know about us can use," she said. "If

you were trying to get information on contractors, you'd have to go to about eight different places."

Baugh doesn't have to maintain the information provided, but staff can access it to make sure it's accurate and up-to-date, giving the company "a little bit of control with our image," Gardner said.

She said she believes CIB's reputation will grow as the business does. "I think people are going to start paying attention to it," Gardner explained.

It may take some time for Oregon contractors to buy into the information clearinghouse concept but once they do, Gardner said, it will likely become a valuable tool industrywide.

"I think that once the word is out and people use it, it will be a good resource," she said.

And, almost as important as the information CIB collects and offers to clients, Gardner said the agency's customer service has been excellent.

"CIB is very good to work with and it gives clients a lot of attention," she said, adding she would recommend its service to other contractors.

Bill Moe of W.G. Moe & Sons said he sees "a real value for what (CIB is) providing to contractors. The information is very beneficial."

Like Baugh Construction, W.G. Moe & Sons uses the CIB as a platform for greater visibility. His company doesn't use the information much for its own research purposes, but Moe said a lot of its subcontractors do.

Moe said the information is especially

beneficial to them since subcontractors are often seeking specific craftspeople.

He said Douglas isn't the first person who has approached him with the idea of an information clearinghouse. "But it never seemed to get off the ground," Moe said.

And he's been impressed with how Douglas is turning a vision into a viable resource. "It takes a while to . . . get contractors to see that what he puts out there is what they need."

Like Gardner, Moe said he would recommend the CIB to other contractors as a referral to check out whether a potential project partner has had citations or complaints brought against them.

But it's not just contractors who benefit from the service Douglas provides. Consumers also gain a level of assurance through the ability to access several government agency documents.

Indeed, the service provides "a great benefit to Oregon and people who would want to use contractors," according to Reg Gregory, supervisor of the Employer Compliance Unit of the state Workers' Compensation Division.

"It's helpful to us . . . that (CIB) verifies that employers have the coverage they say they have," Gregory said. "Just because they're registered . . . that doesn't mean they're covered."

Gregory said the CIB's follow-up on the information his agency provides is "helpful to us because we know we don't have non-compliant contractors out there."

And while that aids consumers seeking legitimate contractors, it also enhances the



construction industry's image overall.

Douglas spent four years as an electrician apprentice, but left his training with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers early to establish the Contractors Information Bureau. The son of an electrical plumbing contractor, Douglas said he often accompanied his father to job sites and helped with sheetrock projects and clean-up work.

His vision for the CIB started as he began fostering relationships with colleagues and clients. "I got to hear both sides of the story," he said.

With both consumers and contractors needing reliable and accurate industry information, Douglas knew he didn't want to operate a standard referral business. Rather, he said, he wanted to provide unbiased background data on a contractors' work history.

"Every person that I've met in the industry . . . always said there's been a need for this," Douglas said. "We had the resources and the time to provide a centralized reference point."

Beyond his vision, Douglas said extensive research he has done during the past two years confirmed that need. He set about compiling a database of industry information that would benefit contractors, consumers, professionals and government agencies.

Douglas said those four groups within the construction industry use the same information he provides, but they use it differently. That information includes government agency reports and construction lien data, for example.

Contractors, according to Douglas, have been most interested in their work history data. "They really want to make sure it's accurate and they haven't had an opportunity to check and make sure the information is correct" when they dealt solely with government agencies, he said.

Beyond that benefit, the CIB provides yet another tool that contractors can use to be successful. Some companies, Douglas

said, didn't think about marketing their information on a central database.

"It's in one place, one location. It's easy and convenient and it's user friendly," he said.

The CIB currently has about 15 contractor members who pay an annual fee of \$125 — and an additional \$10 for each county list on which they want to be included.

He encourages contractors to buy into the agency "to help enhance the construction industry's image."

Douglas said there's so much negative information circulating about shoddy work and rip-off schemes that it behooves legitimate contractors to band together through information technology.

"We're really talking about trying to make the industry stronger," he said. "We've reduced the risk of doing construction contracting at multiple levels."

Douglas stores information on some 44,000 contractors statewide whether they're registered members or not. Specific information on labor issues and the state's Occupational Safety & Health Administration must be purchased separately, he said.

"We aren't marketing a company's weak points — we're not highlighting their mistakes," Douglas emphasized. "That information is available if you want to get it."

What he hopes to accomplish through the CIB is contractor participation, which he says will save consumers time and money when they need to make a choice.

Each registered contracting company can get — and give out — specific information based on its needs. Baugh, for example, chooses not to list company personnel while W.G. Moe & Sons lists its top staffers and their pictures as well as what they do within the company.

Some contractors also include project pictures.

One criteria for contractors to be registered members, Douglas said, is they must have no open complaints with the

Construction Contractors Board.

Consumers pay \$25 for specific company information, which also can include its business summary and mission statement. "That (extra exposure) doesn't cost the contractors anything because they're already registered," Douglas said.

"Now they can come to one place and find out everything they want to know without running around. We put it together so the information makes sense," Douglas said.

By registering, the CIB's consumer clients can get an overview of a company. "They know who you are. They know your license numbers," he said. "It's a personal approach to the client."

Consumers, he added, are beginning to check with the CIB before calling a contractor.

The CIB began registering companies last November and Douglas said those firms have been pleased with what his business offers. "They have a tool they can use to . . . make their company look even more professional. . . . The CIB gives them a leading edge."

Douglas said the CIB offers a service that's been needed for a long time. Still, he said, it's not surprising no one has pulled this kind of information together before.

"I had heard people mention similar things like it was a good idea. But who would take the risk and put their own resources in to starting to try to build that?"

Despite months, indeed years, of hard work, Douglas said it's been gratifying to provide the much-needed service.

"I knew the industry could benefit from it," he said.

The CIB was licensed in 1997. Since then, Douglas has continued to add to the information he provides.

"It takes an innovative company to see a need and create a viable service that people can count on — and we want to be counted on."

Patti Curry is DJC Magazine coordinator.