



Sacramento's Metro Expo gives small firms a seat at the table for government contracting

By Darrell Smith

For small businesses like Roseville-based Cybertary, Thursday's Metro Expo event in downtown Sacramento was a little like matchmaking.

"I didn't want to go solicit them," said company partner Tina Angell, but she hoped the daylong meet-and-greet session would give her fledgling firm a chance to pair up with state and local agencies for government contracts.

"I wasn't sure what to expect but it's been really good. They're open to talk to you," said Angell, whose company provides "virtual" bookkeeping and other office management services. .

In tough economic times, the annual event and trade show, sponsored by the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, offers small firms a shot at bolstering their bottom line through government contracts for infrastructure, computer services, staffing and other projects.

"In challenging economic times, it's important to continue to support and grow existing small businesses," said Matt Mahood, chamber president. "In the end, it helps the region's economy."

Mahood estimates that 80 percent of all businesses in the Sacramento area are small businesses. More than 500 registered for the Sacramento Convention Center event, which included workshops, 150 vendors and about 25 state and local government agencies.

The expo is one of five statewide events created by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to increase small-business participation in state government contracts.

In opening remarks, Rosario Marín, head of the State and Consumer Services Agency, said opportunities for small businesses have "increased dramatically" but there's still room for improvement.

Today, state officials said, small businesses hold 28 percent of all state contracts – exceeding the 25 percent goal set two years ago by the Governor's Office. Some 16,000 businesses are state-certified as eligible, allowing them to compete for contracts with state agencies, 4,000 more than January 2007, officials said.

"We want to do more, not less," Marín said. "We want you to take a piece of that big pie. There will be billions of dollars in the next few years available for small business."

In 2006-07, state agencies awarded some \$2.7 billion to small businesses and those owned by disabled veterans. Over the next nine years, about \$43 billion in bond-funded construction opportunities is slated to be doled out to contractors. But to become eligible for state contract work, a small business must be certified with the state, a process that's been streamlined in the past year.

The state Department of General Services said a new online certification system has reduced the process from weeks to as little as 15 minutes. For more information, go to the department's procurement division at www.pd.dgs.ca.gov.

For Ava Williams, owner of Crisara Creative Therapy, LLC, a Sacramento-based health care staffing firm, becoming eligible for state contracts has already paid off.

"State certification made (our) business an engine to be reckoned with," she said, noting that it has resulted in contracts for staffing health-related events for state and federal agencies. "The dots have been connected, the puzzle has been completed. State contracting is the avenue."