Female-Led Construction Firm Hired for Historically-Sensitive Multi-Million Dollar Project

When it came time to select a consulting company to design and implement a robust local participation program for the largest real estate development in the history of Pasadena, The Construction Services Group, (CSG), a *female-led firm* was chosen for the Ten West Walnut project, a 6.4-acre mixed-use village with 400 residential units, 17,500-square-feet of retail and parking space, and 210,000-square-feet of office space.



CSG's Rose Robinson – Office Manager/Project Manager; Courtney Rajan – Social Media and Communications Manager; Catharine Rajan – President, CEO; Fiona Rajan – Project Manager; Braden Rajan – Senior Financial Analyst.

This site was originally the location of a predominantly African-American community of businesses and homeowners. Through eminent domain actions, the existing populations were displaced in favor of other development favored by the city at the time. Due to these displacements, without any other affordable housing options, those members of the community lost their connection to Pasadena. When it came time to re-develop this same location decades later, the City of Pasadena officials wanted to honor those displaced by providing the community opportunities to benefit from the largest ever real estate development located on this same site.

One of the reasons The Construction Services Group was chosen in the male-dominated field is because of CEO Catharine Rajan's laser focus on ensuring that "hiring local workers is a priority, as is local sub-contracting and procurement." Oh yes, her mantra is also "all about transparency and collaboration."

"The construction field is one of the last industries where you'll still see such significant sex discrimination," Rajan says, whose company specializes in construction project and program management and acts as a liaison between the developers, the city, and the community to make sure all the stakeholders have a voice. "Every executive meeting I've been to in construction, I was the only female. It is unusual for women to be involved in this industry, but I have a passion for the construction process, and I also love opening doors for people who need jobs."

According to The National Association of Women in Construction, women make up only 9.9 percent of the U.S. construction workforce, and earn an average 99.1 percent of what their male counterparts make. "We're hoping to change that," Rajan says.

Even though this project is being built entirely with private money, due to the special historical relevance of this site, the developers agreed to implement a local-hire initiative that gives priority consideration to local workers, businesses and contractors, as well as sourcing materials and supplies locally. Pasadena residents, experienced or non-experienced, union or non-union will be given preference for construction trade positions and administration and support jobs. Included in this program is also a mentorship/internship/apprentice program for workers and students living in Pasadena.

"When we start a project, we don't tell the community here's what we will do, *we ask what they need*," Rajan says. "Once we identify what the needs are, we begin to create partnerships in the community. We tweak the programs to meet needs in a specific community. We get creative and innovative to get those needs met. Everyone has to buy in for it to succeed. When everybody has a place at the table, everyone wants it to succeed."

Rajan has extensive experience working as a marketing executive for large national brands and it was the work she spent in the non-profit sector that has inspired her the most.

"Contractors usually give a big sigh and roll of the eyes when asked to work with locals," Rajan says, "because their preconceived idea of a local hire means an unqualified day laborer that will work for a day or two. We find and provide fully qualified workers."

The CSG staff have several avenues for identifying local experienced workers, such as working with the Foothill Workforce Development Board, city job boards, EDD, Flintridge Center, job fairs, community outreach, Pasadena Community Job Center and email campaigns. "Partnerships are important in the community," Rajan says, "and you need to know who to go to."

CSG provides the economic development opportunities to local laborers and minorities where the projects are based. The company works with contractors to provide the workers with apprenticeship programs or sponsorships into the union for those who cannot afford the initiation fee. These opportunities further solidify career development and financial stability for those who need it most. They are also working with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network to improve the rights of day laborers in the United States.

"Most people have the impression that day laborers are homeless or don't want to work full-time," Rajan says. "Day laborers typically get paid lower wages and are not always treated very well."

Even though the construction industry has remained open amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, it has still affected job opportunities. Contractors have had to lay employees off because access to certain sites have been closed. Challenges also include not being able to meet in person at the construction sites, which means meetings take place via Zoom, yet not all workers have access to computers.

Finding qualified workers has slowed because job fairs and networking have been cancelled. "This forces us to find workers individually, which takes more time and resources," Rajan says. " I don't see the employment situation improving that much in the immediate future. Yet we are pleased to have created partnerships throughout the community and within the construction industry, which provides an expanded visibility to our database of construction workers and administrators.

"This includes more than a thousand additional contractors, above and beyond just those working on the site. Our program gives laborers a priority and potential to land jobs that are available that they might not otherwise be aware of, or be able to get if they were just out there trying to do it themselves. All job placements are a direct result of the outreach we are doing on this project."

The non-profit arm of CSG is called "New Shoes" and was inspired by community activist Clarence Broussard, a longtime friend and mentor of Rajan with extensive roots in Pasadena. Broussard, who recently passed away, wanted to provide parents with the opportunity to buy their children a new pair of shoes, which symbolized stature, accomplishment and hope. New Shoes' provides programs and opportunities to every community where CSG works.

Rajan has also consulted on projects including low-income and mixed-use housing, assisted in locating funding sources for minority entrepreneurial growth, developed programs for low-income women, minorities and youth, and lobbied bipartisan support in state and federal governments. "The exposure to helping minorities is a priority," she says.

Another platform that CSG is launching is a train-to-hire program where it works with contractors who have the need for the digital side of construction, such as quality control and document control. CSG selects the workers and students from its database and trains them to the specific skillset needed for the digital side of work.

"Then the contractors can hire them directly into that side of the industry. This," Rajan says, "creates a whole new vocation for these workers who might not have been able to otherwise get into that type of work." — By Sharael Kolberg, California Business Journal.

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