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Cramped job training center considers move to Wisconsin Ave. building

By **LEONARD SYKES JR.**
lsykes@journalsentinel.com

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The old Advance Cleaning and Supplies building at 3871 W. Wisconsin Ave. could be a possible site for the Center for Excellence, a joint initiative between the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership and Big Step to connect and train minorities and women for apprenticeship opportunities in southeastern Wisconsin.

Advertisement The Center for Excellence has outgrown its present facility at 532 E. Capitol Drive and over the past two years has been looking at a number of facilities in the city for a new location, its directors say.

The strongest candidate thus far is the 30,000-square-foot Advance Cleaning and Supplies building on W. Wisconsin Ave. Advance Cleaning and Supplies occupy the lower level and intends to remain as a tenant, but the top floor is vacant.

Tuesday afternoon, Roberta Gassman, secretary of the Department of Workforce Development, along with members of the partnership and Big Step boards toured the building, which sits on nearly 2 acres of land next to the Wisconsin Ave. viaduct.

Despite Gassman's tour, Eric Parker, executive director of the partnership, said nothing has yet been finalized on the building and the center is still in negotiations on acquiring the property.

"We weren't looking to announce that we were moving here," said Parker. "We're not going to do that until we close."

But he said the deal to acquire the property will require a total development budget of \$1.5 million, including \$850,000 for the price of the building as well as money for renovating the interior for the center's various classes, offices and meeting rooms.

The move would allow the Center for Excellence to bring in some of the trade unions to offer a training component at the center for the first time, said Earl Buford, Big Step's executive director.

Presently, most of the apprenticeship training programs are located in Waukesha County, which has often been viewed as one of the major obstacles in increasing the numbers of apprentices.

With efforts already gearing up to fill a labor crisis in southeastern Wisconsin, Buford said a larger facility for the center would "bring it all together" in connecting the unions with minority workers. Most of the apprenticeship programs are in Waukesha County.

A study conducted for the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin by Northstar Economics has

concluded that over the next 15 years, 50% of the 30,000 journeymen working on construction projects in this part of the state will retire and need to be replaced.

The issue of the failure of the construction and trades industry to aggressively recruit minority workers and apprentices has been raised in a number of major cities, including Chicago, San Diego and Milwaukee.

In March, the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People issued a report that found there were 11 white apprentices for every African-American apprentice who entered the skilled trades in 2005.

The Center for Excellence has been a major part of the initiative to recruit and train minorities for apprenticeships, but its present location is not only small but crumbling, some of its board members told Gassman Tuesday during the tour.

Parker said the board initially had thought about leasing a building. "But when this property became available it looked like the right footprint and the right location," he said. "And we kind of scrambled to put an offer together."

Should the deal to acquire the building be finalized, Buford said it would ultimately enable the center to bring the trades closer to a labor force in Milwaukee.

Milwaukee is one of only a few cities in the nation to develop "a comprehensive" clearing house project such as the one presently under way at the center, and Parker said the center's success has been its track record.

Gassman said the Department of Workforce Development and the Department of Corrections each awarded the center about \$75,000 in 2005 for its training programs to help connect workers with apprenticeship programs.

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