



City Council Education and Workforce Modernization Testimony

Louis Rodriguez, P.E.

November 26, 2019

Good afternoon, City Councilman Curtis Jones and distinguished members of City Council. I am Lou Rodriguez, CEO & President of Rodriguez, a civil engineering and land surveying company based here in Philadelphia. Rodriguez is a minority-certified business enterprise that I founded in 2007. Our mission is to strengthen the Nation's infrastructure and improve our natural resources. I also serve as the Chairman of the Greater Philadelphia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, an organization which represents over 600 small businesses and corporations in this region. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you about Education and Workforce Modernization.

The American Society of Civil Engineers publishes an annual report that addresses the state of America's infrastructure. The cumulative grade point average of which is a **D+**. Pennsylvania's overall GPA is slightly better and is a **C-**. Of which our **Drinking Water** received a **D**, **Wastewater** a **D-**, **Inland Waterways** a **D**, and **Roads** a **D+**. These are grades that we would not be running home to tell mom about.

As a former employee of the Philadelphia Water Department I understand the challenge of managing over 3,000 miles of water mains and sewers that serve a population of over 1.5 million people in one of America's oldest cities. Especially when a large a large portion of this infrastructure was built over 100 years ago and was not adequately maintained over its lifetime.

Over the last five years Philadelphia has experienced unprecedented growth in terms of new construction of residential housing and commercial buildings. This growth has led to tremendous wealth for some. However, our infrastructure is not being maintained at the same growth rate and has led to tremendous challenges for others.

The Philadelphia Water Department has an annual goal to replace at least 40 miles of water mains in order to improve the quality of our drinking water system. PWD also has a 25-year plan to transform the health of the City's creeks and rivers to meet federal regulations and to improve the quality of life of our citizens. Meeting these goals requires financial resources but it also requires **human resources**, technical and non-technical employees that have the skills to do work.

My business is built on supporting these goals and we employ 25 people that love infrastructure and Philadelphia. We have two direct contracts with PWD, two direct contracts with Rebuild, dozens of private contracts with real estate developers, and many MBE subcontracts.

However, my engineering business and many others in our region are faced with a unique challenge, there are not enough trained and experienced people to meet the demands of our current growth and infrastructure goals. Universities are producing engineers that lack the



hands-on skills to be productive when they first start working but they demand high salaries to pay for the immense debt that they accumulated over 4-6 years. Companies like Rodriguez are then forced to spend 1-2 years of our resources to train these engineers to be productive and risk losing them to an aggressive job market.

Supporting infrastructure also involves a lot of jobs that do not require a college degree such as draftsmen, construction inspectors, and land surveyors. Quite frankly, these positions provide the greatest potential to the people that live in the communities that we serve but they are, by far, the hardest to fill. We routinely interview people that attended local trade schools that lack the basic communication and math skills required to perform the duties of the job.

An example of how this lack of supply has affected our local economy is that a large portion of the computer aided drafting work on these infrastructure projects is done overseas. This is not driven by cost. It is driven by the fact that the workers overseas are in greater supply and have far greater technical skills than our workforce. These overseas firms can produce a better product in less time.

If we are going to meet this challenge we need to support initiatives like the **PHL Neighborhood Growth Project** that will focus on **HANDS ON TRAINING FOR 21ST-CENTURY JOBS**. We need to **create meaningful alternatives to conventional college education** that are supported by our local governments and our local corporations. This is coming from someone that serves as a Board Trustee at Widener University, one of our region's leading higher education institutions.

We need to **focus on teaching people the relevant skills** they need to be immediately productive in the workforce. Companies like Rodriguez are looking for skills, not paper credentials. We need to find ways to pay students while they get this training, not the other way around. The US Armed Forces is the best example of this business model.

I am doing everything I can to meet this challenge. In 2019 I formed Rodriguez University, a division of my company that is focused on training and developing workers for infrastructure jobs that do not require a college degree. We partnered with Hopeworks, a non-profit organization, that has a 20-year track record of creating workforce development programs for underserved communities. We have just received two grants and will begin launching our program in 2020.

I wish to close by thanking Council for its support of the **PHL Neighborhood Growth Project**. This initiative is essential if we are to improve education and modernize the workforce in our region. If successful, it will allow individuals that live in underserved communities to obtain meaningful jobs, such as supporting our aging infrastructure.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this initiative.