

Whittaker sees union as trouble

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The construction company owned by Powerball winner Jack Whittaker and its subcontractor have generated more than 1,000 complaints about workmanship and damages to property on a project in Wood and Pleasants counties.

But Whittaker says there really aren't any problems and it has all been blown out of proportion by the unions.

The complaints are from customers of the Union Williams Public Service District, where Whittaker's company, Diversified Enterprises, and its subcontractor, Zion Inc., are constructing a wastewater treatment plant.

According to Katy Mallory, executive secretary of the West Virginia Infrastructure and Jobs Development Council, it is a \$17.9 million project designed to serve about 1,800 customers.

Jessica Greathouse, spokeswoman at the state Department of Environmental Protection, said, "There have been about 1,400 complaints -- not from 1,400 separate individuals, but repeat complaints."

In a story headlined "Diversified Has Problems Delivering," the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation's September newsletter says more than 1,500 complaints have been filed.

"Damages to property, shoddy repairs and lack of communication are some of the recurring themes of the many complaints" filed with Union Williams, the foundation says.

The foundation is the research, lobbying and advertising arm of the West Virginia State Building Trades, which consists of 20,000 union construction workers from West Virginia and surrounding counties.

"We don't have any problems with that job," Whittaker said. "We built a whole different job than what we bid. The union's been trying to force me into joining the union for 20 years. For as long as I take a breath, I will never be a union man.

"I do \$70 million worth of work a year and they find one little thing and want to blow it out of proportion. They may have 1,400 pieces of paper, but when you cross probably 2,000 yards and some of those complaints are taken 10 times before you can answer them and they're complaints about the grass not growing and normal bull---- like that, I've had all I can take."

Diversified has three of the Union Williams project's six contracts. Mallory said a July report by the DEP shows all three Diversified contracts are slightly behind schedule.

Steve White, director of the construction trades foundation, said, "1,400 or 1,500 complaints is astounding to me."

But Whittaker said White, "a guy from the labor board," and "a guy going around to all of my jobsites from the Laborers Union" are "impeding my contract obligations, trying to ruin my reputation.

"I am preparing a \$100 million lawsuit against all of those people," Whittaker said. "They are badmouthing my operations without any proof. Don't say nothing about my family or my construction ability. I will not put up with it."

Diversified Enterprises has grown since Whittaker won a Powerball prize of nearly \$315 million on Christmas Day 2002 and received a one-time payment of \$113 million. Diversified Enterprises is now the eighth largest employer in Putnam County, according to the Workforce West Virginia Division of Research, Information and Analysis.

Whittaker said Diversified has up to 600 employees during the summer and said he owns 23 companies with a total of more than 2,300 West Virginia employees and a \$1 million weekly payroll.

The Union Williams Public Service District project isn't the first time Diversified Enterprises has encountered controversy.

The company took more than a year to perform the work required under a construction contract at the Fraziers Bottom Business Park in Putnam County. The work was originally estimated to take 128 days.

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