

Diversity Strides Expected As New Administration Begins

Tourism, Real Estate Leaders Share Hopes for Federal Policy



Vice President Kamala Harris celebrates with President-elect Joe Biden after being sworn in. (Getty Images)

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As the U.S. inaugurates a new president, expectations from corporations include encouragement to continue making progress on diversity and inclusion efforts.

During a panel in the “New Administration and Policy Priorities for Economic & Social Inclusion” webinar hosted by New York University’s School of Professional Studies, leaders in the commercial real estate and travel industries spoke about changes they’ve seen and what they hope happens under the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden.

Changes in Recent Years

The travel industry has always been a leader in diversity because of the nature of international travel, and that applies to both large and small brands, said John Tanzella, president and CEO of the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association, or IGLTA.

The killing of George Floyd highlighted the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion, he said. It’s critical to a company’s employees as well as its customers.

“This [has] really brought attention to the leadership within corporations and tourism businesses. How diverse is your board, and how diverse is your executive team, because your customer base is probably very diverse,” he said.

The commercial real estate industry has a relatively tainted history when it comes to diversity in America, said Ken McIntyre, CEO of the Real Estate Executive Council, a professional trade organization comprising minority men and women in the commercial real estate industry. People of color were legally excluded from the industry, and government policies and programs distanced them until the middle of the last century.

“People of color are playing a game of catch-up in an industry that, by definition, was exclusive or exclusionary that way,” he said. “For the past 30 or 40 years, we’ve made strides.”

Members of his organization have reached the executive ranks within the industry, but the percentages are low and the challenges and barriers feel high, he said.

Desired Federal Policies

Something the Real Estate Executive Council has advocated for is an expansion of the definition of diversity, because it can apply to more than just employees, McIntyre said.

“There's diversity on where you spend your money as a company, as a municipality, as a government,” he said. “Where does that money go, into what type of firms and what types of communities? And how do you advance those diverse communities getting access to capital, so that they can participate in the economy and grow with the economy and actually cause the economy to grow?”

Citing [research by Citibank](#), McIntyre said the U.S. economy would be \$16 trillion larger if communities of color had been included in a more inclusive way. These are meaningful changes the incoming presidential administration should recognize, he said.

Another policy piece in need of expansion or clarification is the opportunity zone legislation, McIntyre said, noting there needs to be some accountability on the outcomes of the program.

A vaccination program that reaches all segments of the U.S. is key, because until people are vaccinated and comfortable with traveling, businesses in the travel and tourism industry are going to have another difficult year, Tanzella said.

Biden recently announced he plans to lift the travel ban on predominantly Muslim countries. Tanzella believes that will be huge for the industry and the country as well.

Hiring

Oftentimes an organization will say it couldn't find a qualified diverse candidate to apply, a notion that Sonya Anderson, president and chief impact officer at Thrive Chicago, scoffs at. She said she also disagrees with the idea that there aren't many diverse candidates who make it to the final stages of an interview process.

“Part of what we really tried to emphasize is the way you get a diverse group of candidates at the end of the process is to stack them at the beginning of the process,” she said.

Those hiring need to be intentional about casting a wide net, going to both the usual suspects and the unusual suspects to look for candidates who may be qualified but aren't on the radar, she said. It's also about holding the line and being willing to make the hard decision to halt the process if they aren't seeing the kind of diversity they want to see.

Anderson said her nonprofit organization — which seeks to align the efforts of youth service providers — also evaluates how leadership looks in terms of diversity, both at the executive and board levels. It's not just about a junior staff person or administrative staff, who are vital to an organization's functions.

“We're really looking for ways that we can elevate diversity throughout an organization and really have folks sitting in positions of leadership and decision-making,” she said.

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