

Amazon's North Randall fulfillment center project target of protests over minority construction jobs

By Michelle Jarboe, The Plain Dealer
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NORTH RANDALL, Ohio - A dust-up over minority construction hiring at the [Amazon fulfillment center project in North Randall](#) is casting a cloud over long-awaited activity on the [former Randall Park Mall site](#) - and spurring a war of words between the mayor of this largely African-American village and the outspoken president of the Black Contractors Group.

In email blasts and flyers, Norman Edwards claims that black workers are being shut out. On Monday, he organized the first of what could be many protests, in a very public push to put e-commerce giant Amazon and North Randall Mayor David Smith on the spot.

[Seefried Industrial Properties, Inc.](#), of Atlanta bought the former mall site in August and is developing a sprawling distribution building there for Amazon, which has signed a long-term lease. The fulfillment center, expected to open next year, will employ more than 2,000 full-time workers who will gather up, pack and ship small items such as books and consumer electronics.

Edwards, known for his fiery rhetoric, says he'll stage protests and bring in busloads of clergy and contractors from other states to join him until at least 20 percent of the workers on the site are black or Hispanic. "Damn them," he said of Amazon.

"We don't want them in the neighborhood," he added. "We're going to have a national boycott on them. We're going to keep coming."

Smith, who also is black, said he's committed to inclusion and has no quibbles with the quest for more diversity on construction sites. But he's frustrated by Edwards' tactics.

"You can't stop people from protesting," Smith said. "But what really irritates me is that you don't have all the facts, and you have people that are following you in the protests."

Some cities and counties do attach hiring requirements - for local workers and minority- and female-owned contracting businesses - to public projects, though there's a [statewide fight](#) going on over the legitimacy of local-hiring regulations.

The Amazon fulfillment center, though, is a private construction project.

The village, Cuyahoga County and the state are chipping in - in the form of property-tax abatement, money for road improvements and [job-creation tax credits](#) tied to Amazon's tenure and employment on the site. But those incentives don't carry race-based hiring requirements.

The [Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Port Authority](#)'s board [signed off](#) in July on the agency's plan to issue and sell up to \$123 million in taxable bonds to help fund construction. That bond-financing transaction doesn't involve taxpayer money. The port, which has a two-tiered mission of supporting maritime activities and economic development, is a conduit. The agency collects a fee for issuing bonds sold to a private investor. Amazon's rent payments will cover the debt.

The port does have an inclusion policy, which applies to the North Randall project and its other development-finance deals. That policy sets a benchmark of 20 percent participation in a project by certified minority-owned or woman-owned businesses.

The port doesn't have legal authority to force developers and contractors to hire certain workers - or to punish builders who don't. But 90 percent of port-assisted projects meet that 20 percent goal, and the rest aren't far off, said Jade Davis, vice president of external affairs.

"What we have done is as much as we could, given the current regulatory and legislative framework in which we're working," Davis said of the port's inclusion efforts. "We have tracked numbers, and we've been pretty successful in compelling people we have worked with on the development finance side to hit those numbers - or get very close."

Clayco, a real estate and construction firm based in St. Louis, is the general contractor on the Amazon project.

A Sept. 28 status update provided by the port showed that much of the work, from fencing to painting to masonry, hadn't been awarded yet to subcontractors.

Of the jobs that had been assigned, almost 25 percent of the spending was going to businesses owned by women or minorities - exceeding the port's threshold.

Edwards said that doesn't cut it, since some companies are owned by white women.

"We want black companies that are going to come in there and have black workers or Hispanic workers," he said. "We have contractors that are confident and that are capable."

Seefried, the developer, referred questions about the project to Amazon.

In an email, an Amazon spokeswoman wrote that the company has "a long-standing dedication to diversity and inclusion" and is fully meeting its commitment in North Randall.

"From the very beginning, our project partners reached out to and included [minority-owned and woman-owned] trades and business owners in the bid process," Lauren Lynch, the spokeswoman, wrote. "We are always listening to the community and striving to be valued contributors. When we open a new building, bringing thousands of jobs to a community, we offer competitive wages and great benefits starting on day one."

Congresswoman Marcia Fudge, a Democrat who represents Ohio's 11th district, said in an emailed statement that Amazon has assured her that the company is committed to diversity and inclusion.

"I'm now asking that they honor that commitment," she said. "This new facility will be built in a community that is 98 percent African-American. It is essential that the people who live there not only have the opportunity to work there but also provide the goods and services to bring this project to fruition."

Amazon recently [announced plans for](#) a second fulfillment center, employing 1,000 workers, in Euclid. That building won't open until 2019, and the financing still is taking shape. But Edwards already is planning to take his protests to that city, where Seefried expects to buy and demolish the empty Euclid Square Mall and nearby buildings to create a development site.

"This isn't stopping," Edwards said. "It's not a one-time deal."

Smith, who views Amazon as the centerpiece of a turnaround for his tiny, cash-strapped community, is fed up. A recent meeting between the parties, including representatives for the developer, public officials, the port and the Black Contractors Group, didn't lead to a resolution.

"We met Mr. [Edwards] with an olive branch, and he meets us with a sledgehammer," Smith said. "And, might I add, none of his support is anybody that resides in the village of North Randall."