

Clive McFarlane: Much work to do to make ballpark project inclusive

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Now that Worcester has lured the Pawtucket Red Sox here and committed to the \$240 million project to build a ballpark and redevelop the area around it, some officials are acting like unofficial umpires and shouting, “Play ball,” already.

But wait. Aren’t we jumping the gun? Don’t we still have a few “I’s” to dot and “T’s” to cross, like choosing the players who will help make the ballpark, to be named Polar Park, an economic success?

Sure, some like Michael Traynor, the city’s chief development officer and chief executive officer of the Worcester Redevelopment Authority, seem to think that the city has all the players it needs to move forward.

At least, that is how his assessment at a recent WRA meeting, in which members discussed the participation of women and minorities in the construction of the ballpark, came across to me.

Told that we are in an era of out-of-the-box thinking in ensuring women and minorities are well represented in public economic development projects in the state and that the WRA perhaps needs to embrace these new approaches, Mr. Traynor was less than convinced.

“We do have a policy; it’s not like we have nothing,” he responded.

“We can look at how we might be able to tweak it. We certainly will look into how we’re going to monitor this, enforce it and maybe have some best practices in place before we go forward with the ballpark project. We will look into everything.”

That defensive response can best be characterized as a heap of empty promises and a vote for the status quo.

At the meeting, David Minasian, vice chairman of the WRA board, tried to explain that while the city has a Responsible Contractor Policy that sets a 20 percent hiring goal for minorities, women and low-income residents, the policy is less demanding and less effective in assuring targeted outcomes than policies being followed by state agencies such as the University of Massachusetts Building Authority and the Massachusetts Gaming Commission.

In addition to setting specific hiring goals for women (6.9 percent) and people of color (15.3 percent), the UMBA policy comes with rigid compliance requirements and an Access and Opportunity Committee that meets every other month to monitor contractors' compliance with those requirements.

"At the beginning of each job UMBA gives each of their construction managers (CMs) templates to submit monthly diversity data," he noted in an email to me on Friday.

"The CM does pre-construction meetings with each contractor reminding them of the diversity goals, letting them know they are to take these goals seriously, and letting them know they are expected to bring in diverse work crews from day one."

Construction managers also hold similar meetings with subcontractors to stress "the importance of diversity and how to track it," he wrote. He also noted projects are assigned a compliance officer and that "contractors that have high work hours, but are not in compliance, have to have a corrective action meeting (the compliance officer and construction manager) to outline a plan for improving their numbers."

According to the Access and Opportunity Committee for UMass, a recently completed research laboratory renovation project surpassed the goals set for women and people of color, with a 9 percent participation rate for the former and an 18.1 participation rate for the latter.

Two current projects, according to the committee, are meeting the set goals or are on track to do so.

"Prior to the AOC oversight meetings, UMass Amherst's compliance numbers were dismal," Mr. Minasian noted.

"Essentially contractors knew the goals existed but without oversight they ignored them."

Encouragingly, other members of the WRA - attorney Michael Angelini and Sumner Tilton - appear open to upgrading the WRA's policy. City Manager Edward Augustus said on Friday that he is also supportive of revising the policy to "be more inclusive in the work that we do and the contracts that we enter into."

So, with all due respect to Mr. Traynor's aforementioned contention that "it's not like we have nothing," I would say, sir, in comparison to the UMBA, the WRA does indeed have nothing. And before we start playing ball at Polar Park, we should have something.