

Local construction contractors feel ‘overlooked’ by city

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By Angelica Robinson

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FORT WAYNE, Ind. (WANE) – Some local contractors say they are being overlooked by the city of Fort Wayne for construction projects. The city is working to bridge that gap.

A group of construction workers on the southeast side of Fort Wayne wrote a letter to Mayor Tom Henry in Sept. 2017. However, they felt ignored long before that.

“When they bid on these jobs as minorities, a lot of them get overlooked,” said Leroy Johnson Jr., a retired construction worker. “They’re up in arms and trying to make this a fair bidding process.”

Jackson Jr. worked in construction for more than 40 years. He has been a mouthpiece for a group of black contractors and is working with the city to help them land jobs.

In a letter, Jackson Jr. and others asked that the city to make more of an effort to contract local businesses, especially those owned by minorities and women.

“I’m just trying to help other people get to where I’m at,” he said.

The group was upset they had not been included in several of the city’s redevelopment projects, including some on the southeast side of town. However, those projects are a public-private partnerships, which means the developers are not obligated to have an open bidding process.

Cedric Walker, who heads the Posterity Heights project, said he has contracted several local minority construction groups in an effort to fill the void.

“We’re doing whatever we can to fill that gap but we can’t do it with one project,” he said.

Infrastructure and city utilities projects are open to public bids and that’s where Councilman Glynn Hines (D) sees a missed opportunity.

“The city of Fort Wayne has been spending millions of dollars on streets, curbs and sidewalks and some of the minority vendors haven’t been able to play,” he said.

Hines said the city began looking at ways to involve minority-owned and women-owned businesses with city projects years ago. However, he said he has seen very little change.

City Spokesman, John Perlich, confirmed that the city began collecting data on those construction contractors and other businesses dating back to 2012. The goal was to identify potential opportunities and help those vendors get contracts.

Perlich said there were more than 200 letters sent out in Oct. 2017 as a result of the study.

The letters went to construction contractors of all sizes to make them aware of the opportunities in the City of Fort Wayne. Larger contractors were encouraged to utilize minority-owned, women-owned businesses and Emerging Business Enterprises for sub-contracting work on construction projects.

“We’re hopeful that the businesses will see the letter and that they will recognize that there are steps that they can get involved in city projects and take that next step so they can be a partner of ours in the future,” said Perlich.

“I’ve met with the city,” said Jackson Jr. “We’ve actually had some work done by minority contractors through the city. So, it’s getting better. It’s going to be a long drawn out thing. It’s going to take us a while but at least we are having conversations.”

City of Fort Wayne’s website shows when bids will happen and how people can participate.