

Minorities say they are left out of Will County projects

[Susan DeMar Lafferty](#) Contact Reporter

Daily Southtown
chicagotribune.com
March 8, 2018

Members of the African American Business Association of [Joliet](#) said they have been left out of Will County's building projects and urged county officials to adopt a "minority participation" resolution.

They recently conducted a peaceful protest at the construction site of the new county courthouse in downtown Joliet after one member, Willie Sellers, who has a trucking company, was removed from the job because he was not in good standing with the local [Teamsters](#) union, and would not sign the required Project Labor Agreement, union officials said.

The county signed a Project Labor Agreement with the Three Rivers Construction Alliance to guarantee that all contractors would be union members, pay union wages and would not strike or slow the project. While that does not include specific provisions for hiring minorities, county officials have pushed the construction manager, Gilbane Construction, to use Will County contractors, and to urge successful bidders to hire local subcontractors and workers.

But the issue goes beyond that, according to Cornel Darden Jr., and George Pearson of the business association, who, along with Sellers, urged the county's Capital Improvements Committee on Tuesday to discuss the issue of hiring minorities and building relationships with the black business community.

A minority participation resolution would set goals regarding the hiring of minorities, they said.

They also attended the Joliet City Council meeting Monday night and asked them to consider the same resolution, they said.

A goal to hire 20 percent minorities does not mean every job has to have 20 percent, but "when you set a goal and make an effort to reach it, then as a community you can get there and have mechanisms in place to achieve goal," Darden told the Daily Southtown.

To provide more opportunities to minorities, Pearson said they need to build a relationship with the county, so when another project comes up, their association can reach out to its members.

The courthouse is not the biggest issue, Darden said, but the fact that no one thought about minority participation before the project started.

Anytime the county buys or builds something, minorities should be "at the table and not on the dinner plate," Darden said.

Committee chairman Ray Tuminello, R-New Lenox, said after learning of the protest last week, he went to the job site Friday, and found 35 workers on site, which included four females, two African-Americans and two Hispanics — 22.8 percent women and minorities, he said.

Tom White, executive director of Three Rivers Construction Alliance told the Daily Southtown two firms were on the job that day and one was owned by a black female.

Prior to bidding, the county held three outreach sessions, to attract Will County contractors, and Tuminello said he was "disappointed" that "very few" minorities attended.

They tried to break down bid packages for the \$200 million courthouse project so smaller contractors could participate.

"I will do whatever it takes to level the playing field, but at the end of day, the bid has to go to the lowest responsible bidder," he said.

There will be more opportunities to bid projects, he said, adding, "we should work together."

Board Speaker Jim Moustis, R-Frankfort Township, acknowledged that the bidding process "squeezes out a lot of people," but it is required by state law.

"We want to make sure everyone gets a piece of the pie," he said, promising to talk to them about other ways they can participate. "Let's build that relationship."

Assistant State's Attorney Mary Tatroe said she would look over the proposed resolution, but noted that quotas are illegal.

"There is a way to find room for everyone. If you comply with the PLA and live up to union standards, there's no problem," said White, whose job is to enforce the Project Labor Agreement.

The Teamsters union was willing to work it out with Sellers, "all he had to do was call them," but then he started the protest, he told the Southtown. "There is not much I can do if he doesn't do it the way everyone else has to do it."

Sellers told the Daily Southtown he previously was a member of Teamsters Local 179, a Will County union, but switched to Local 786 in Chicago.

Greg Elsbree, secretary/treasurer of Local 179, said Sellers did not want to sign the PLA with the Will County local, which is required on the courthouse job site.

"I am always willing to help my members, but I cannot do anything that is below the area standards" for wages and benefits, he said.

"He wants a contract that will give him an advantage over everyone else on the job. He is trying to make this a color and gender barrier and it's not," Elsbree said.

Sellers, who added he draws a pension from Caterpillar, said he just wants work for himself and he doesn't need full benefits. He said he needs the work because his pension does not cover "the lifestyle to which my family is accustomed."

He said he does not want to switch locals again and sign the agreement with Local 179 because it does not fully fund its pensions.