

Rally held at Erie Insurance construction site

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By David Bruce

Dec 6, 2017

Protesters call for Community Benefit Agreements to ensure disadvantaged residents share in investment returns.

A dozen members of several community-based organizations rallied Wednesday near Perry Square outside the construction site for Erie Insurance's new seven-story office building.

Carrying signs that read "Hire Someone Like Me" and "Erie Belongs to the People," the protesters called for the insurance company and other local businesses to hire more minorities and women on construction projects. They also want them to preserve and restore historically black and immigrant neighborhoods, and pay to help recruit and train local residents for construction jobs.

They are calling on local government and business officials to pursue community benefits agreements, legally binding agreements that ensure residents — especially those in neighborhoods targeted for development — share in measurable returns on those investments, such as work, affordable housing and entrepreneurship.

"If you take a walk in this project right now, I don't know how many people of color you will see in there working and I don't know how many females you would see in there working," said Gary Horton, president of the Erie chapter of the NAACP. "A community benefits agreement will show people who ride by here or walk by here that this project is inclusive and might inspire others."

Members of Erie County United, the Erie Community Benefits Agreement Coalition and the NAACP participated in the noontime rally, which came about three weeks after the local NAACP chapter held a news conference to discuss how CBAs could address the income, poverty and employment disparities affecting black residents in Erie.

The new conference occurred after an article was published by 24/7 Wall St., a Delaware-based financial news and opinion company, that ranked Erie as the worst city in the U.S. for black citizens, based on several factors.

Freda Tepfer, of Erie, attended Wednesday's rally to support CBAs and call on local businesses to employ more local people, both during construction and after the project is finished.

“More local people need to be trained and employed in these projects, but also in these good jobs at places like Erie Insurance and UPMC (Hamot),” Tepfer said.

Erie Insurance officials said that the construction project wouldn’t fall under a CBA because they typically are signed when public money is used or when residents are displaced.

“In our case, there is no public funding involved, not even for infrastructure needs such as lighting or sidewalks,” Jeff Brinling, Erie Insurance’s senior vice president of corporate services, said in an email. “Additionally, the development site for the new building had been a parking lot, which (Erie Insurance) has owned since the 1980s.”

Brinling added that Erie Insurance works with its contractors to hire local workers but the region is facing a shortage of skilled labor in the construction and building trades.