

Worcester Redevelopment Authority pushes minority hiring in construction

By Nick Kotsopoulos

Telegram & Gazette Staff

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WORCESTER - The Worcester Redevelopment Authority board has revised its Responsible Employer and Inclusionary Participation Policy by incorporating goals the city recently set for the hiring of women and people of color to work on its construction projects.

The revised goals, which are in accordance with findings of the 2019 Worcester Construction Workforce Disparity Study, will apply to all WRA projects, including the construction of Polar Park going forward.

In December, the WRA board approved a policy that commits every contractor to workforce diversity and good-faith efforts to meet hiring goals it has set.

Those goals included having 25% of work hours going to Worcester residents, 15.3% to people of color and indigenous people, and 6.9% to women.

But the City Council last month went one step further when it unanimously supported revised goals for the hiring of women and people of color to work on locally funded public construction projects and private development projects that receive tax incentives from the city.

The city's new workforce goals, which are believed to be among the most aggressive in the state, are 10% women and 38% people of color.

The updated workforce goals are based on the findings of a comprehensive Worcester Construction Workforce Disparity Study that was initiated by Mayor Joseph M. Petty last year. The city, in partnership with the Worcester Community Labor Council, contracted with the University of Massachusetts at Boston for the study.

When City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. came forward with the revised hiring policy, he noted that existing city projects already underway, such as Polar Park, would continue to follow their currently contracted workforce goals.

He said the city administration did not have the legal authority to retroactively modify pre-existing contracted goals. But the WRA board could revise the hiring goals for the Polar Park project going forward.

That prompted the WRA board to unanimously agree on Friday to amend its Responsible Employer & Inclusionary Participation Policy. The change will apply to every tier of the Polar Park construction project going forward.

WRA board member David Minasian said incorporating the city's hiring goals into the WRA's policy is an important step to further closing the disparities between the demographics of Worcester as a whole and the construction workforce for public projects.

"I think this makes a lot of sense; it's a good public policy to do," Mr. Minasian said of the change. "The real value of this policy is addressing equity issues around the city in terms of economic status and race.

"Ed Augustus really focused on a data-driven reason as to why this policy is in place," he added. "He should really be commended. I think Worcester is in the forefront on this in Massachusetts. What this really does is open up an opportunity for people who traditionally haven't had opportunities. Now is the time to open up that door and create opportunities. I think this policy does it thoughtfully

Currently, only 2% of construction workers in Worcester County are women, while they make up 4% of the workforce in the city.

Meanwhile, construction workers of color make up an average 26% of workers in construction occupations in the city and 13% in Worcester County.

The Disparity Study concluded that the best estimate for the availability of qualified and interested women and people of color in the city with transferable skills to the construction industry is 10% for women and 38% for people of color.

At its meeting Friday, the WRA board also received the first report on workforce diversity and inclusion for the ballpark project to date.

Danielle L. Skilling of Gilbane Construction Co. said the project has started off well as far as the workforce goes: 34% of the work hours went to women, 68% to people of color and 10% to Worcester residents.

Those numbers are based on roughly 1,000 work hours that have occurred to date, she said, adding that amount is considered "a drop in the bucket" for the ballpark project.

While the work hours for women and people of color far exceeded their goals, the participation by Worcester residents fell far short of the goal of 25%, though Ms. Skilling said she expects to see the number for Worcester residents increase in the coming weeks. She said efforts are already in the works to boost the participation of Worcester residents on the project.

"Things seem to be trending in the right direction," she said. "It's definitely something to focus on."

Mr. Minasian noted that the first report is a "tiny little snapshot" of where the project stands and where it needs to go. He said there is plenty of time to bring the participation numbers for Worcester residents in line with the goal that has been set.

“Even though the numbers aren’t there the fact that we are having a conversation about getting more Worcester people is a success in the policy itself,” he said.

Greg Ormsby of city’s Office of Economic Development said the city is taking a very pro-active approach to meeting the hiring goals and has emphasized to contractors the need to hire Worcester residents.

He said the city is not waiting for certified payrolls to come in to determine what has to be done next, but rather has tried to anticipate what needs to be done and adjust its efforts.

“We’re not taking a passive approach on this,” he said.

Until now, Ms. Skilling said, she has been active at the work site about twice a week. But as the project ramps she anticipates being there more often so she can interact with the contractors and construction workers on a regular basis.

“This is key to keeping the numbers up,” she said.

Polar Park will be the home of the top minor league team of the Boston Red Sox, starting in the 2021 season. The ballpark is part of an overall \$240 million redevelopment of the Canal District/Kelley Square area.

While the estimated construction cost of the ballpark itself has been pegged at \$86 million to \$90 million, the overall cost of the project has been estimated at \$100.8 million. That includes off-site land acquisition and other improvement costs that are related to the ballpark project. Construction of the ballpark is scheduled to begin in July and be completed in March 2021.