

NORWOOD NEWS

Published in the October 18, 2007 Edition

Hopes for Armory Include Push for Living Wage

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NORWOOD NEWS

The mall and recreation complex coming to the Kingsbridge Armory will undoubtedly host well-known retail stores and provide more goods to local shoppers, but it is unclear if this kind of new business will provide good jobs for Bronx workers.

To see the Armory's vast commercial potential, look no further than River Plaza in Kingsbridge, which opened in 2004. The Plaza, anchored by a Target store, is swamped with customers at all times of the day and night.

Activists like Desiree Pilgrim-Hunter of the Kingsbridge Armory Redevelopment Alliance (KARA) think being allowed to build in the community is reward enough for retailers - cheap labor shouldn't be yet another incentive to put a mall in the center of the Bronx.

"We need not just any jobs," Pilgrim-Hunter said. "Our campaign is for quality jobs a family can live on."

In a letter to the Armory's two potential developers and the Economic Development Corporation (EDC), the city agency in charge of the project, KARA demanded two things: that all employers coming in to the mall participate in a local hiring program and that 75 percent of Armory tenants pay living wages.

For the past year, KARA, a collective organized by the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition made up of elected officials, community groups, and religious and union leaders, have been pushing potential developers to promise in their proposals that stores will pay \$10 per hour, the city living wage requirement for contractors doing city business. But developers are hedging.

"It's nebulous, general language and we really need commitments," Pilgrim-Hunter said, adding that an EDC-formed Armory task force comprised of residents and community leaders, is not completely happy with the proposals they have seen. "Based on no changes in the living wage language, we cannot recommend either group," she said.

Spokespersons from the two developers, The Related Companies and Atlantic Development Group, both said an earlier agreement made with the EDC prevents them from offering any comment about living wages right now.

Armory task force members are confident of achieving their goals, despite the discouraging recent history of big Bronx projects (see Croton Water Filtration Plant and Yankee Stadium) that have failed to deliver many local jobs.

Jeff Eichler, of the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), said he thinks the task force will succeed in getting better wages. The labor leader likes KARA's numerous activist members and said the group enjoys broad support, which will come in handy during the city's Uniform Land Use Review Process (ULURP). That is the

public's chance to ask City Council members to vote for or against the project.

"Altogether, we add up to a pretty substantial force," Eichler said.

According to the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), which assists groups around the country with living wage campaigns, the goal is to "[require] private businesses that benefit from public money to pay their workers a living wage," because "public dollars should not be subsidizing poverty-wage work."

ACORN argues that when companies pay low wages, taxpayers get hit twice: first by subsidizing city projects like the Armory's \$30 million new roof, then by funding the food stamps, emergency medical, housing and other social services low-wage workers depend on.

Department of City Planning statistics indicate that more than half of Bronx wage earners work in service or sales industries. According to the Census, the Bronx median wage is at \$28,000 - not much above the national poverty level of \$20,000 for a family of four - in one of the most expensive places to live in the nation.

"We get negative outcomes when parents work two or three jobs and can't come home and take care of their kids," Pilgrim-Hunter said. Making a decent living, she added, is "being able to pay bills, feed your family and have benefits to take care of yourself and them."

Even working families sometimes have to turn to local soup kitchens for help, said Jack Marth, a legal clinic coordinator for the homeless services center POTS (Part Of The Solution) in Bedford Park, which served almost 8,000 people last year.

"Seventeen percent of our clients work full or part time," Marth said.

Although critics say unemployment increases when businesses hire less employees at higher pay, ACORN argues on their Web site that higher wages translate into less poverty, and that minimum wage buys less now than it did in the 1960s. They say the boon in service jobs, like restaurant and retail work, is where low wages are found the most.

Ken Small, development director of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), a Bronx group that advocates for low wage workers, agrees that it's better to begin with fewer employees earning a higher wage if you want a community to grow.

"Economic stability is the foundation of economic prosperity and a living wage can help move workers' families into middle class standing," Small said.

The living wage debate is happening all over the country. Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley recently vetoed a bill called the "Big Box Ordinance," which required large retailers to pay a living wage of \$10 an hour, because he was afraid of scaring away business. Restaurant and hotel owners in Santa Monica formed the group "Fighting Against Irresponsible Regulation" to keep minimum wages from hitting a high of \$10.50 per hour, but lost the fight in 2001.

New York City has yet to make a stand for or against legislation requiring big retailers to pay a living wage.

Ed. note: KARA is holding a rally at the Armory on the living wage issue on Oct. 27. See p. 17 for details.

Printed November 9, 2007 at 1:07 PM EST