

Residents say schools' labor proposal discriminates against minority firms

By Gabrielle Banks
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A dozen residents at last night's city school board hearing urged the board members to reject a proposed labor agreement regarding building contractors, stressing that the plan discriminates against minority workers.

The project labor agreement with the Pittsburgh Regional Building and Construction Trades Council of the AFL-CIO would place a \$25,000 cap on nonunion projects for Pittsburgh Public Schools. All projects that cost more than \$25,000, it says, must be completed with union workers.

No one testified in support of the plan.

Doris Carson Williams, of the African-American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania, suggested the board set a higher threshold for union contracts, perhaps \$500,000.

Most of the speakers focused on what they saw as a historic problem that the board was ignoring.

"I will always be a union man," Charles Graham, 71, of East Liberty, told the board members, "but there comes a time when you have to be honest and break away."

Graham explained that he went to trade school to work in refrigeration and air conditioning after returning from the Korean War. His 16 white classmates all got union jobs, but Graham, who is black, was unable to get one for 17 years. He said young black tradespeople still do not have equal access to work opportunities in Pittsburgh.

Each of the speakers opposing the agreement emphasized that they are pro-union, but said setting the cap this low denies opportunities to workers who cannot get union jobs.

"This hits at the problem of social and economic justice not only in Pittsburgh, but in the whole nation. Do we deny, ignore or rationalize the inequalities in our community?" Tamir Shaheed, of Lincoln-Lemington, an independent painting contractor,

asked the board.

Nikki Moore said she helps at-risk youth in the East Hills get building trade jobs. All of these young people dropped out of the Pittsburgh schools, she said, and now the board will be denying them jobs.

The groups opposing the agreement also include Hispanic and Asian building and contracting organizations, according to Earl Brooks, who represents a national association of minority contractors.

"I am amazed by the apathy and ignorance of the school board at its last legislative meeting," he said.

The school district has a system in place for seeking bids from underrepresented companies for building projects. If the board wants to level the playing field, Brooks said, it does not make sense to ignore this system and set such a low bar for hiring minority businesses.

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