County officials are in hot seat with NAACP

NAACP questions county’s bid process and Liberty Square redevelopment at meeting

Gregory W. Wright | 2/3/2016, 2 p.m.

Deputy County Mayor Russell Benford and Darryl Holsendolph

At the Jan. 27 meeting of the NAACP Economic Development Committee, representatives of the NAACP and area residents met with county officials and staff from County Mayor Carlos Gimenez’s office, to ask pointed questions about both the latest developments in the Liberty Square redevelopment project, and to ask for clarification on the county's bid process itself.
But as Deputy Miami-Dade County Mayor Russell Benford began to explain the county process, meeting moderator Darryl Holsendolph made it clear that he wanted to know, specifically, why groups, outside of the Black community, are able to receive no-bid contracts, while predominantly Black companies are increasingly left out of that process. He also wanted to know why other people, who do not look like him, have access to information on county project developments, while the Black community, again, is continually left out.

"It is insulting to this organization [NAACP] when other organizations are invited to be involved and the NAACP is not invited," said Holsendolph at Miami Central High School.

Of particular interest to the gathering, including NAACP Miami-Dade Chapter President Dr. Shirley Johnson, and other attendees: Why was it necessary for Mayor Gimenez to change the bid process for the Liberty Square redevelopment project, and to narrow down the bidding to only the top two-ranked developers, Atlantic Pacific Communities and Related Urban Development Group, telling them both to now come back and submit their "best and final offer?"

Due to an existing cone of silence covering the Liberty Square Rising redevelopment project, Benford could not go into specific details on this project, but did explain how the current unit layout consists of 700 units, while only housing 600 families. This will allow for existing residents to be moved to vacant units while their previous units are under construction, which will allow families to stay on site and not be relocated to other neighborhoods.

Indira Rajkumar-Futch, committee chair, for Public Housing and Community Development, on Monday said the “Mayor provided a directive to request Best and Final Offers (BAFO) from two top ranked firms Atlantic Pacific Communities LLC and Related Urban LLC to seek the best possible financial return to the County, and most beneficial combination of housing options and amenities consistent with the best interest of the residents of Liberty Square and Miami Dade County.”

At the meeting, some in attendance, like Holsendolph, believe that Gimenez may have an ulterior motive for the change in the bid process.

"I believe this is a stall tactic to prolong the decision until after the elections," said Holsendolph. "We need him to afford diverse teams that include all demographics of this community, and not just the Hispanic companies.

"All the firms are qualified," Holsendolph continued. "That is not the question. Why can't people of color be included in the opportunities that others are afforded? A local firm, The Miami Yacht Harbor, presented to the NAACP a 5,700-job project of which 1,400 jobs will be permanent. They informed our executive committee that the David Beckham deal for [the] soccer [stadium] would have been a no-bid deal for the exact same location. “A $100 million dollar terminal at the seaport in which the county is giving $10 Million to Royal Caribbean in incentives was granted a no-bid; Perry Ellis and Bongos at the airport are no bid. Twenty-five million dollar-Metrorail Station in Coconut Grove was a no bid sponsored by Xavier Suarez, who voted against the Miami Yacht Harbor. They give it to some but not to people of color or not the chosen ones politically."
Holsendolph, the moderator, kept the topic on the lack of inclusion of the Black community when it comes to the county's bid process.

"What is the process why people from other communities, who don't look like me, can get no-bid contracts and we can't?" said Holsendolph. "How can we, people of color, be engaged in the process?"

The discussion then turned to ways of improving the communication network in the Black community, making Black community organizations both the repositories and disseminators of information.

A person looking for employment should be able to go to community agencies such as the NAACP or Miami-Dade Chamber of Commerce, either their offices or websites, to see what government or major projects are scheduled for the area, and learn the hiring process and/or skill requirements for that project.

In the end, meeting attendees were left pondering how to improve communication, both in gathering information, and then filtering that information down to street level.

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