

New committee to improve equity in building industry

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The Boston City Council Committee on Government Operations held a public hearing last Friday on the establishment of a commission for economic justice within the city's construction industry.

The hearing in the Iannella Chamber of City Hall was sponsored by Councilors Lydia Edwards, Ayanna Pressley and Kim Janey, and presided over by Edwards, committee Chair Michael Flaherty and Councilor Ed Flynn, with Councilor Annissa Essaibi-George also present.

The proposed commission would be in charge of assessing construction trade unions and non-union companies on how they are increasing the number of Boston residents, workers of color and women employed on construction projects and entering apprenticeship programs.

History

Efforts to create a more equitable workforce in Boston date back as early as 1983, when Mayor Kevin White and the City Council passed the Boston Residents Job Ordinance which required all city-financed construction projects to have a minimum of 50 percent of work hours performed by Boston residents, 25 percent of work hours performed by people of color and 10 percent of hours performed by women laborers.

The BRJP was further strengthened in 1986 under Mayor Raymond Flynn with a second ordinance establishing the Boston Employment Commission to enforce the policy and broadening its scope to include private projects of 100,000 square feet.

With many construction projects still failing to meet the standards, Mayor Martin J. Walsh and the City Council in 2017 approved a revised BRJP raising the minimum standards to 51 percent of work hours to be performed by Boston residents, 40 percent by workers of color and 12 percent by women.

"Some barriers remain unaddressed," said Edwards on the continued efforts to increase equity within the construction industry workforce. "This proposed economic justice commission puts people who are directly impacted at the forefront of helping come up with solutions."

John Barros, chief of economic development for the City of Boston, said there is currently \$9.3 billion worth of construction activity in Boston and another \$6.8 billion in the pipeline.

“It’s an injustice to not have our residents participate in that kind of economic activity,” Barros said. “We have made progress since we updated the BRJP two years ago, but there is more work to do. We have laid down this new ordinance that allows us to collect more data.”

Proposed commission

The currently proposed commission for economic justice in Boston’s construction industry would hold public hearings at least twice a year with representatives of each trade union and each open shop trade association to assess how many residents, workers of color and women are working for them and entering their apprenticeship programs.

The mayor would appoint a representative from each of the nine city council districts, selecting from one or more nominees put forward by each councilor, to serve on the commission for a two-year term concurrent with the elective term of each councilor.

The mayor also would appoint four representatives of his or her own, as well as a chair of the commission, to serve for a term concurrent with the four-year mayoral term. The ordinance calls for the mayor-appointed representatives to be nominated by community organizations or individuals and to have experience advocating for Boston workers, workers of color, and women workers.

The commission would report to the City Council twice a year through public hearings and would be assisted by city-funded staff.

Efforts so far

Boston Employment Commission Chair Travis Watson said the BEC, which has the authority to levy fees and fines to companies who are not meeting BRJP standards, has been meeting with representatives from union and non-union trade associations to assess their compliance for the past 10 months.

However, “Assessing unions is a lot easier than [assessing] the open shop world,” Watson said at the hearing. “Union leaders are willing to work with us towards compliance and they’re active thought partners for a more equitable industry.”

The way unions are organized makes communication easier with the city, he said, but many of the city’s open shop contractors don’t belong to a larger organization and tracking their compliance is more difficult.

Mary Vogel, executive director of Building Pathways, provided testimony on her organization’s efforts to create a pipeline of qualified Boston residents, workers of color and women workers in the construction industry.

Created in 2011 in partnership with the Boston Housing Authority, Building Pathways prepares trainees, many of them women, formerly incarcerated individuals and at-risk young adults, with the skills to enter apprenticeship programs.

“These jobs provide a good salary, benefits and the ability to retire with dignity without needing to have a college education,” said Vogel.

Since the program’s founding, according to Vogel, 255 trainees have graduated in 18 training cycles, with 86 percent of them being people of color and 42 percent of them being women. The program has a graduation rate of over 93 percent and a placement rate of over 85 percent in apprenticeships or other related employment.

In addition, The Northeast Center for Tradeswomen’s Equity, a nonprofit located in Roxbury, launched a recruitment initiative with Building Pathways to bring more women and women of color into the building trades.

Concerns

There was debate around the topic of whether the BEC should have authority over the new commission.

Flaherty brought up a concern whether to appoint the proposed commission’s responsibilities to BEC, since the entity has the authority to levy fines and fees.

While Watson said he is cautious of the potential duplication of work, he said, “There is an opportunity for the BEC to take on this work. In the last year or so, we have been doing that.”

But Chuck Turner, former city councilor and coordinator for the Boston Jobs Coalition, later countered this suggestion.

“BEC doesn’t have the capacity to set up four hearings a year, talk with unions and open shop associations, and work with them in between those hearings,” he said.

He added, “The commission should represent the people. The individuals are nominated by the council but are really neighborhood-based to build this plan. If a government entity takes it over, it doesn’t work.”

Edwards expressed concern that the BEC could levy fines on unions.

“It could end up punishing some entities who are trying to do the right thing,” she said.

Michael McDonagh, CEO of The Associated Subcontractors of Massachusetts, echoed Edwards’ concern. “There is a shortage of skilled laborers in general, throughout the state, in all trades,”

he said. "This adds a layer of complexity when with good faith efforts, we're trying to find enough skilled workers to put on a job."

Impact

Other testimony focused on the people who need jobs.

Essaibi-George said, "It's important we are constantly looking for ways to put out kids from our schools on every job site in the construction trades."

Referring to vocational schools such as Madison Park High School, and directing her comments at Barros, she said, "I would like to see your office playing a bigger role in expanding training. We got to put our people to work."

In his testimony, Turner said, "I don't think the ordinance will create some magic. This will only work if the commission members are talking to people in their neighborhoods about who is interested in construction and talking to unions and non-unions to bring those young men and women from all districts."

Priscilla Flint-Banks, co-founder of the Black Economic Justice Institute, said unions should be held more accountable to the city to include more people of color and women. "I ask to adopt the commission to break the cycle of black and brown residents being left out," she said.

Several people spoke of how trade union membership has increased their economic stability.

Labelle Armstrong, Dorchester resident and alumna of the all-women's class at Building Pathways, testified that she was able to put her daughter through college because of her union job in the building trades. "Union jobs are very important for me and they provide opportunities for single mothers to be independent, buy homes and put their kids through college," she said.

Kiana Johnson, a Dorchester resident and operating engineer from the Local 4 Union, said that as a mother, she is "very thankful for the job I have," after going through a four-year apprenticeship program.

Victor Fernandez from Mattapan, also a Local 4 Union member, said he previously worked 70 hours a week as a truck driver with no overtime pay. In his current job, he said, "I have great benefits, including a pension when I retire."