

Hiring in the Hill District: the new arena and hotel are meeting goals

A community benefits agreement places Hill District residents, minorities in jobs at Consol Energy Center and Cambria Suites hotel

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By Mark Belko, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Rebecca Droke/Post-Gazette

Brian Brown of Plum, who does utility prep for Aramark, has been working at Consol Energy Center since last fall.

It was born out of the deal to build a new arena and took more than 12 months of protests, demonstrations and "pretty fierce" negotiations.

But more than two years later, a community benefits agreement tied to the construction of the Consol Energy Center is producing dividends for Hill residents.

Of the 522 full- and part-time jobs created at the new arena and the Cambria Suites Pittsburgh hotel next door, 203 have gone to people who live in Hill District ZIP codes or who used a Hill jobs center created as part of the agreement, according to the Pittsburgh Penguins.

That's nearly 40 percent of all the new jobs. At the hotel, 27 of the 37 new jobs, or nearly 73 percent, have gone to people with Hill ZIP codes or who used the First Source Center.

"I think we're very pleased with the results of what really is a partnership with the Penguins," said Victor Roque, president and CEO of the Hill House Association. "They have been very supportive in opening doors and making sure people in the Hill District and African-Americans in general were given a fair shot at these jobs."

The agreement between the Penguins, Hill leaders, the city and the county was considered the first of its kind in Pittsburgh and was aimed specifically at the neighborhood that abuts the arena.

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As part of the community benefits agreement, the Penguins committed to giving qualified Hill residents first consideration for jobs at the Consol Energy Center before opening the positions to other applicants.

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The agreement also provided for the creation of the First Source Center, which handles job applications, pre-screens people for work, helps prepare applicants for interviews, offers career counseling and other services, and maintains a database of qualified applicants for various positions.

Of the new hires, 107 came through the First Source Center, which is managed by the Hill House Association.

Many of those hired from the Hill or through the First Source Center are minorities. Overall, 244 of the 522 new hires, or 47 percent, are minorities, according to the numbers compiled by the Penguins. At the hotel, 57 percent of the people hired have been minorities.

One Hill resident hired was Melissa Klobuchar, an administrative assistant to human resources for Aramark at Consol Energy

Center, which opened in August.

A single mom, Ms. Klobuchar got her job in September after going through the First Source Center. She had previously worked as a waitress and at other administrative jobs.

She said she was drawn to First Source because she had heard "great things" about it being successful in placing people. She said she probably wouldn't have learned about the Aramark job had she not gone to the center.

Once there, she was interviewed, got help in fine-tuning her resume, and was asked about her interests and goals. After being interviewed by Aramark, she got the job.

"I love it. I love my job," she said. "The people are great. I feel comfortable here. What I don't know, I'm able to learn. I'm able to use my skills."

Carl Redwood, convener of the Hill District Consensus Group and the point man for the community benefits agreement negotiations, said the Hill had done "pretty well" in getting residents in arena and hotel jobs.

He credits the community benefits agreement, which gave residents first crack at jobs, and the Penguins, who he said have honored the agreement and "did what they said they were going to do."

"They agreed to do it for real," he said. "The Penguins were really serious, and they've gotten good employees from the Hill District as a result."

Nonetheless, there is more work to be done, Mr. Redwood said.

He said too few people from the Hill were hired to do construction-related work at the arena, describing the overall effort as "terrible." He did not blame the Penguins, who oversaw the work, but the contracts with labor unions, which he said did not contain provisions for hiring Hill residents.

That, he said, must change once the team begins redeveloping the 28 acres of land in the lower Hill that includes the Civic Arena, which is scheduled to be demolished unless local preservationist groups succeed in designating it as historic.

The team, he said, also must have "the same resolve" it did with the Consol and hotel hirings in making sure Hill residents get their fair share of jobs once the redevelopment starts to take hold.

It's important that the jobs be "family sustaining," he added. Otherwise, Hill residents could be priced out of their neighborhood as development occurs and property values increase, he said.

Mr. Redwood said he had been satisfied so far with the type of jobs Hill residents have been able to obtain at the arena and the hotel. Mr. Roque said jobs had been filled in a number of areas, including security, concessions and ticketing.

"I think they're good jobs. I think they're a good match for the people we are referring in terms of the skill set and what they're looking for," he said.

Travis Williams, the Penguins' senior vice president of business affairs and general counsel, said the team was committed to extending the same policies to the lower Hill redevelopment.

He said the Consol and hotel hirings were but a "microcosm" of what can be done on the 28 acres. The Penguins have estimated that the proposed redevelopment would create 4,200 construction jobs and 2,900 permanent jobs.

With such numbers, "You really can dramatically impact unemployment in the Hill District and the entire region," Mr. Williams said.

The team, he noted, also is committed to ensuring adequate Hill and minority representation in hiring being done for the T.G.I. Friday's restaurant opening at the arena and in its other retail spaces on Fifth Avenue.

Mr. Williams said part of the problem with the construction-related jobs was that there weren't many Hill residents affiliated with local trade unions or who had the skills to do the work.

The Penguins, he added, are working with the First Source Center to develop training programs so that residents will be able

to join trade unions and qualify for construction jobs as part of the 28-acre redevelopment.

State Rep. Jake Wheatley, who was a critic of the community benefits agreement, agreed that more needs to be done to train Hill residents for construction jobs as well as other work that will become available in the future.

During the community benefits agreement debate, Mr. Wheatley, who represents the Hill, argued that more money should be coming back to the neighborhood from the Penguins to help support development above Crawford Square.

He said his criticism had been validated by a proposal by the Hill District Consensus Group to redirect \$1 from each fee charged for parking at Civic Arena lots or the Consol parking garage to a Hill community development fund.

Nonetheless, despite his qualms with the community benefits agreement, Mr. Wheatley had positive things to say about the jobs that have gone to Hill residents as a result.

"Anytime people are getting jobs, that's always a good thing," he said.

The community benefits agreement also provided \$2 million -- \$1 million each from the Penguins and the city Urban Redevelopment Authority -- toward development of a neighborhood grocery. The money will be used toward the construction of a Shop 'n Save on Centre Avenue expected to open before Thanksgiving.

Mr. Redwood said the consensus group's next push would be for the community development fund. If the team were to donate \$1 a car, it could generate \$600,000 a year for the neighborhood, he estimated.

That money, he said, could be used to help senior citizens with transportation, assist homeowners with repairs to their houses, crack down on drug trafficking on Centre Avenue and provide programs for young people.

The \$1 per car would be but a small fraction of the thousands of dollars a day the Penguins make off parking, he argued.

"If they're not playing hockey well, they make more money parking cars than they do playing hockey," he said.

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