

B.W. Cooper residents want promise of jobs on redevelopment project fulfilled

by Richard A. Webster, Staff Writer

Published: April 13th, 2011

It should have been different, said Dawayne Shelley as he stood on the perimeter of a construction site at the intersection of Erato and Galvez streets, staring at silhouettes of workers framing steel in the distance..

It should have been the type of story that lifted up all New Orleanians, he said — dozens of public housing residents hired to work on the redevelopment of B.W. Cooper, trained in construction and given skills that could result in careers instead of perpetual minimum wage employment.

It would have been beautiful, said Shelley as he pictured the children of the B.W. Cooper Housing Development watching their elders strap on hard hats and tool belts every morning and walk across Erato Street, disappearing into the dusty construction site to build a better future for their community. And nine hours later, these same men would return, exhausted, sweaty and aching, but proud to have shown their children there is something other than the street corner, drugs, violence.



Lifelong BW Cooper resident Dwayne Shelley, with Delores Blanche, talks about the difficulties he has faced trying to get a job working construction on the redevelopment of the area. (Photo by Frank Aymami)

This is what should be happening. This is what was promised, said Shelley, a lifelong resident of B.W. Cooper. But it's not reality.

Despite federal requirements and assurances from HANO's Administrative Receiver David Gilmore, the jobs have yet to materialize.

Every morning the residents of B.W. Cooper are awakened by the thundering of pile drivers and the echo of hammers pounding nails into wood that, one day, will constitute the walls and ceilings of their homes.

But the people operating the machinery are not from B.W. Cooper; many of them are from out of state or across the border. Instead of taking part in the redevelopment, the public housing residents watch through a chain link fence from hundreds of yards away as others reap the benefit of hundreds of millions of dollars in work in their own backyard.

Instead of holding hammers, they hold picket signs demanding jobs.

Instead of gazing at their elders with respect as they return from a long day on the job, the corner boys shake their heads, Shelley said, knowing that once again their people were passed over by the government, destroying a vestige of hope that they can escape their lot in life without a fistful of cocaine.

"This is a beautiful story that you can paint for New Orleans after Katrina and all the wrongdoing. You can show that you're doing good by these communities by hiring folks and giving these kids something positive to see," Shelley said. "But it's not right what's happening. All you're doing is slapping us in the face every day by not hiring the people who live here."

The residents' belief that they were promised jobs stems from a now famous quote from Gilmore who issued a new directive requiring that people from Orleans Parish make up 40 percent of the work force on the B.W. Cooper redevelopment.

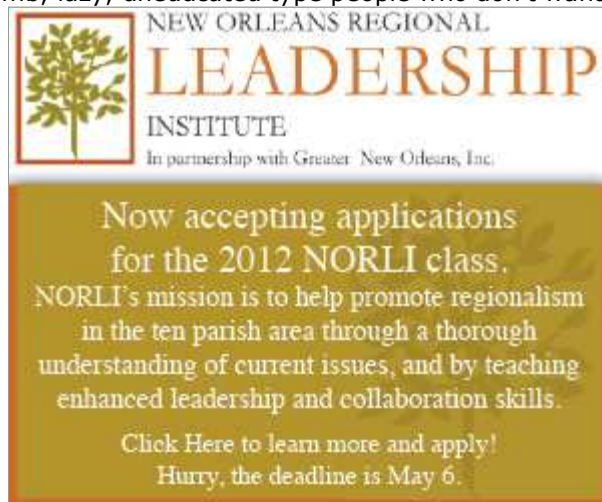
Gilmore said it was his attempt to improve on a more narrowly tailored federal law entitled Section 3

that requires 30 percent of all new hires on federally funded public housing projects be locals — with the highest priority given to residents of the public housing under construction, in this case B.W. Cooper.

Currently, there are 24 people working on the project, including eight New Orleanians, with only two hailing from B.W. Cooper. As soon as the bulk of federal funds arrive in the coming weeks, more jobs will be made available, Gilmore said.

But Shelley doesn't believe it.

"They're playing us like we're buffoons, dumb, lazy, uneducated type people who don't want to work,"



he said. "But there are hundreds of people who would wake up at two or three in the morning and love to come to work, come out in the cold weather, the rain, whatever. People want to work. They don't just want a job, they want the opportunity to learn something different."

The people of B.W. Cooper have demanded a meeting with Gilmore, something he said will never happen for two reasons.

First, George Gates, HANO's director of Section 3 compliance, has met with the residents on multiple occasions. He is the expert and is best equipped to address their concerns, Gilmore said.

Second, Gilmore refuses to serve himself up as a punching bag.

"They wrote me a letter saying, 'We expect an answer from you by a certain date.' As long as they use this terminology they'll never get a meeting with me. I'll respond when I respond. I understand the need to get recognition from the guy at the top but that doesn't get you squat."

However, Gilmore said he understands the frustrations of the B.W. Cooper residents. They live in a city that for decades has offered the poor sub-standard education and limited career opportunities. But they are wrong to think the construction site offers salvation, he said. There are only so many jobs to go around, ensuring a large number of people will be disappointed, and little chance those hired will go on to long, profitable careers in the construction industry.

"For folks to pin all of their life's hopes on the one likelihood that they are going to get a job on this work site is a real serious mistake," he said. "In a larger context, it says something is really wrong with a system that can't seem to keep people employed."

There also seems to be a misunderstanding when it comes to his "40 percent" comment, Gilmore said.

Forty percent of the work force must be from Orleans Parish over the lifetime of the project, not during any random snapshot in time. Just because there aren't many B.W. Cooper residents or New Orleanians working at present doesn't mean there won't be in the future, he said.

And if the developer fails to meet the 40 percent requirement, Gilmore said he will impose stiff monetary penalties.

The residents have little reason to believe such a pledge, said Colette Tippy, the campaign and resource coordinator for the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice. Lead developer KBK Enterprises, based in Columbus, Ohio, has failed to provide transparency or clear information regarding their hiring policies and has disregarded a list given to them of B.W. Cooper residents, many

of them with construction experience, who are ready to work, Tippy said.

"This is a story that continues after Katrina of poor people from New Orleans, especially black people, being locked out of jobs because they're bringing in people from other places to replace them," she said.

The residents' mistrust is a result of their past dealings with the previous HANO administration and the demolition of the big four housing developments following the storm, said Gates, HANO's Section 3 director.

"There is reluctance, paranoia, resentment and angst in regards to what the government has done to them. But it's our responsibility to let the residents know it's not like that anymore," Gates said.

Despite acknowledging the residents' desperation for work, Gilmore said his immediate priority is completing 175 units by Dec. 31 or risk losing additional federal funding to complete the entire project consisting of 410 units.

"If the contractor says, 'If you're telling me I have to hire these 10 folks (from B.W. Cooper), it puts me over my budget and I have to stop work to train them,' that's a problem. I have to produce 175 units at the end of the year. If I don't, I give back millions of dollars worth of tax credits and I'll have to answer to somebody."

To sign up for CityBusiness Daily Updates, click [here](#).

Complete URL: <http://neworleanscitybusiness.com/blog/2011/04/13/b-w-cooper-residents-want-promise-of-jobs-on-redevelopment-project-fulfilled/>