

Leaders question \$1.3B school upgrade deal

Upgrades

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There were more questions than answers at a public meeting Monday about the unexpected cancellation of a key labor agreement that was part of Rochester's \$1.3 billion schools modernization program. In fact, there were no answers at all to the most important questions — why was the deal canceled, and what happens now?

“I would like to know what the plan is,” City Council member Elaine Spauld said.

The gathering in City Council chambers, attended by about 50 people, was to discuss the demise of the modernization program's project labor agreement, which required contractors to use union labor, laid out wage and other rules, and embraced goals for hiring disadvantaged employees and minority and women-owned firms. Such agreements are common for publicly-funded construction projects in Rochester.

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The appointed board that oversees the mammoth schools upgrade voted 4-3 on Aug. 4 to do away with the program.

Most of those who attended the gathering Monday, called by an ad hoc collection of council, city school board and Monroe County Legislature members, spoke in favor of the project labor agreement. They said the PLA used in the first phase of the modernization program had lowered costs, offered scheduling predictability and provided a means to meet minority-employment and subcontracting goals.

Several people on Monday called the diversity program in Phase I the most ambitious and successful in city history.

None of the members of the appointed board who voted to kill the agreement for Phase II showed up at the gathering to explain their action, leaving the elected leaders at the meeting in City Council chambers professing confusion.

“I've heard a lot of reasons to support the PLA. What I'm missing today is the rationale, or what the members of the board would put in place to guarantee ... the representation of city workers, of minority workers, in the program,” said Councilmember Carolee Conklin.

The cancellation of the PLA for Phase II is widely seen as the handiwork of Mayor Lovely Warren. Three of the board members who voted for cancellation are City Hall employees named to the board by Warren.

The fourth cancellation vote came from Ineabelle G. Cruz, a recent joint appointee of the mayor and school superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams.

Warren, who has not addressed the PLA decision publicly, has previously expressed unhappiness with the

minority hiring and job training aspects in the first phase of the program.

The newly elected chairman of the appointed board, Allen Williams, who is Warren's special projects director at City Hall, said the project-labor agreement "didn't pan out" in Phase I.

Bob Brown, a member of the appointed board who voted to keep the PLA, said he had no clue to the other members' motives. "When they came into that room, they came to vote 'no.' There was no discussion," Brown said Monday.

The first Phase II project, the completion of extensive modernization work at Monroe High School, is out to bid now. Bids from contractors are due Aug. 30, and the contract is scheduled for award on Sept. 12.

Bidding contractors must lay out how they intend to meet the program's minority employment and business goals. If the PLA were in place, the local building trades unions would be obligated to supply minority employees and help the contractor meet its goals. Bidders now must devise other ways of meeting the targets.

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