

# Worcester can build on REO

## AS I SEE IT

By Frank Kartheiser

The Responsible Employers Ordinance (REO) before the Worcester City Council does not go far enough, but it is a start.

The Worcester Community Labor Coalition -- comprised of a 11 community organizations and 17 building trades -- has developed a set of guiding principles that reflect community economic development needs, such as, local hiring of disadvantaged workers, women and people of color, as well as access to jobs that provide workers with wages and benefits to sustain their families. These, in turn, create economic stability and stimulus in Worcester. Coalition members believe that good economic development includes community development.

The REO before the City Council includes provisions for contractors on publicly-financed construction projects -- which use our tax dollars -- that adhere to MA General Laws and which maintain or create bona fide apprenticeship training programs so that the next generation of construction workers will become skilled professionals. This REO establishes a minimum standard for contractors looking to bid for work in Worcester, and has provided the stimulus for conversations about what needs to be in place for Worcester. But these conversations need to continue.

Worcester residents should benefit from tax dollars that are used for local economic development projects. To establish hiring goals for residents and disadvantaged workers who have not had the opportunity to participate, specific next steps are required. First, Worcester needs to conduct a disparity study to identify which residents have been left out of the economy. According to State documents, the courts have made it clear that in order to implement a program (which addresses issues of inequality) that is effective, enforceable and legally defensible; it must meet the judicial test of constitutional "strict scrutiny." Strict scrutiny requires current "strong evidence" of the persistence of discrimination, and "narrowly tailored" measures to remedy that discrimination. A local disparity study will provide the evidence required to meet this standard.

Once the study is complete, as a community, we need to determine specific hiring goals for disadvantaged residents, young people, women and minorities that are clearly measurable, enforceable, and accountable for all parties. Transparency and accountability are necessary to achieve compliance.

Finally, we need to establish a structured vehicle through which to reach out and engage those left out of the economy, beginning with a state-approved pre-

apprenticeship training program. This will provide those interested in acquiring or improving their construction skills with a program through which to gain the necessary skills, while construction companies benefit from a pool of uniformly and adequately trained workers.

Experience shows that the issue of job access for the underserved needs to have continued collaboration from the City, community based organizations, the building trades, and contractors alike. While this may seem burdensome, there is already broad community and labor support for these principles. Worcester has the contractors and training programs in place to be successful, but local government needs to move beyond short term attempts at economic development to respond to deeper community challenges.

When the REO came before the City Council for adoption on Tuesday night, the Worcester Community Labor Coalition asked that it be held until the next Council meeting on August 14th. Mayor Petty agreed and held the vote. Delaying the vote allows time for additional community discussions to take place. While much collaboration has already occurred, there are still those who need to be at the table. I have called non-union contractors and the Merit Construction Alliance requesting they meet with us to iron out our differences so we can begin planning for a local disparity study.

While this REO is only a start, we believe it begins the necessary work of connecting community development with economic development.