



State Reviewing Columbia's Minority Hiring at West Harlem Campus Expansion



By **Jeff Mays** on June 5, 2013

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[@JeffCMays](#)



HARLEM — A new Columbia University report which claims to have exceeded its agreed-upon goals for hiring sufficient numbers of minority, women and local workers to build the school's new \$6.3 billion **Manhattanville campus in West Harlem** is under review by the state — and at least one company listed denied ever having done any work on the project, DNAinfo New York has learned.

On the heels of complaints by skeptical local representatives who dispute Columbia's claims about minority and local hiring, the Empire State Development Corporation says it "is reviewing the back-up documentation to verify that these numbers are accurate."

The state ESDC will issue a report this summer "that will assess Columbia University's compliance...including their (minority, women and local) hiring obligation," said a spokeswoman for the agency.

Columbia has exceeded minority, women and local contractor spending goals by 63 percent and minority, women and local work hours by 67.5 percent so far, according to a report the university submitted to the Empire State Development Corporation on April 15 and obtained by **DNAinfo New York**. Columbia agreed to the hiring goals as part of a community benefits deal for the project.

One contractor Columbia listed as a local firm on the report was Absolute Plumbing and Heating, but an employee said the company was not doing any work on the Manhattanville campus expansion progress when contacted by DNAinfo New York.

Reached at the company's offices on Frederick Douglass Boulevard between 149th and 150th streets, the employee, who declined to give his name, said the firm had been performing work on the Morningside Heights campus.

"That's new construction and we don't do new construction," the employee said when asked whether he was sure that his company had not worked on the Manhattanville project.

In another instance, Pearlgreen, a firm that is located in New Rochelle according to its website, is listed as a locally-based firm on Columbia's report. New Rochelle is not within the range of local businesses established by the community benefits agreement.

Pearlgreen, which supplies contractors and also makes safety netting, was formerly located in Harlem at 131st Street and relocated because of the Manhattanville campus expansion. They moved to New Rochelle in August 2011.

A Columbia University spokeswoman said Pearlgreen counted as a local firm since it had an office in Harlem when the contract was awarded. The spokeswoman, Victoria Benitez, declined to comment on Absolute Plumbing and Heating.

Benitez also defended the school's minority hiring and said the university does try to independently verify local firms.

"Those firms may have other offices, but Columbia does do spot checks to verify that there is an operating office at the local address provided," Benitez said.

The school also relies on agencies such as the Metropolitan Transit Authority and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to determine the minority, woman or local status of a firm, Benitez said.

As part of the community benefits agreement Columbia signed before construction on its new campus began, 35 percent of the dollar value of non-specialty construction work, which excludes work on the foundation, was supposed to be done by women, minority and local firms. The agreement also required 40 percent of the workforce to be minority, women or local.

"Columbia has made a significant commitment to the minority, women and local construction contracting and workforce community," Benitez said.

But critics say they remain skeptical about the veracity of the numbers provided by Columbia because the university so greatly surpassed stated goals, and they want the data to be more closely examined.

"My concern is to make sure there is not blatant misrepresentation happening," said Community Board 9 Chair Rev. Georgette Morgan-Thomas. "Our main objective is to help Columbia help our community benefit economically."

The school says that from August 2008 to December 2012, it has spent 57 percent of the \$62 million from non-specialty construction contracts, or \$35.7 million, with minority, women and local firms. The university also says 67 percent of the work hours on the project went to minority, women or local workers, a sum that amounts to 197,998 work hours.

The numbers best goals set in the community benefits agreement by an average of 65 percent.

"I don't have the confidence that these funds are coming back into our community. We are not seeing the results of this much money," Morgan-Thomas said.

"That's not a credible report," added Larry English, a CB9 board member and former chair who is working with Morgan-Thomas to make sure Columbia abides by the community benefits agreement. "The suggestion that minority and local firms received well over 50 percent of contracts worth \$35 million is ignorance. We in the community are not ignorant."

Columbia is expanding onto 17 acres of land from West 129th to West 133rd streets, between Broadway and 12th Avenue. The **metal skeleton for the first phase of the project**, the Jerome L. Greene Science Center — which the university hopes will be the site of major scientific breakthroughs— is rising now and scheduled to open in 2016.

The university has received criticism for everything from **not hiring enough** local and minority workers to **excluding a group of Black, local architects** who tried to submit bids to work on the project.

Local leaders say they are concerned that neither the addresses nor zip codes of the firms and workers listed were included in the report.

The report is the second issued following a two-page document released by the university that contained even less information, said Kofi Boateng, executive director of the **West Harlem Development Corporation**.

Boateng said the lack of address information makes it too difficult to confirm Columbia's numbers and to "make a more definite assessment of the impact of the dollars flowing to" firms and workers in West Harlem and Upper Manhattan.

Boateng also said he's concerned that the figures are skewed too heavily in favor of local firms, rather than minority-owned firms. Out of the 57 percent of spending for the project that was done with minority, women and local firms, minority firms received 4 percent of that total and local firms received 45 percent, according to the university's report.

"Columbia certainly needs to do a lot of work to...raise up the participation of the minority in minority, women and local," Boateng said.

Morgan-Thomas said she had serious concerns about how Columbia determined that a firm was local, noting that many of them were located in The Bronx.

Under the benefits agreement, there are 13 Manhattan zip codes and four in The Bronx defined as local. Of the 20 firms listed as local, at least 10 were located in The Bronx, according to online address listings. Seven companies had addresses in Harlem. The locations of three firms were unclear.

"Just because they have a local address does not make them a local company," said Morgan-Thomas. "Before we reach out to a zip code in The Bronx, we have to give access to the businesses in Harlem zip codes."

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