

NOW THAT THE BONDS HAVE PASSED...Does the Community really have a say?

Written by Jeffrey L. Boney Associate Editor
Wednesday, 10 April 2013 00:00

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Last November, Houston voters went to the polls and passed a massive 1.89 billion bond package for the Houston Independent School District (HISD). The bond passed by a margin of nearly 2-1 and received significant African-American support at the polls, with the re-election bid of President Barack Obama driving the numbers.

Now that the bond has passed, many African-American stakeholders in Houston believe that they are not being shown the respect they deserve, particularly when it comes to the process used to select the firms being considered to design the schools in their community.

It is the process, centered on the latest round of recommendations that has riled up many people in the African-American community.

According to a recent statement issued by HISD, administrators are recommending that the HISD Board of Education authorize the district to negotiate design contracts with 12 firms on a dozen new 2012 bond projects, including 10 of the largest high schools. The projects represent about \$750 million in bond dollars. The Board of Education will consider the recommendations at its meeting at 5 p.m. on April 11, 2013, in the Hattie Mae White Educational Support Center, located at 4400 West 18th Street.

The recommendations are the latest in the program. On February 14th, the HISD Board of Education authorized the district to execute contracts with eight firms for selected projects and on March 6th, the Board authorized the district to negotiate contracts with firms on three more 2012 bond projects.

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As part of the review for the latest round of contracts, the district formed committees and invited members of each school's staff and community to review the three finalists selected for each project. According to HISD, the committee's feedback was to be used to help guide the district's recommendations.

Of the 12 new bond projects, Yates High School is one of the schools on the list.

Several members of the committee selected to review the three finalists for the Yates High School campus believe that their feedback and recommendations has fallen on deaf ears and that the community needs to know.

Larry Blackmon, a 1968 graduate of Jack Yates and member of the community selection committee, says that they met with HISD until about 11 pm on April 3rd and felt uneasy before the meeting even started. Blackmon says that he came into the meeting and asked, "Do we really have a say-so in this matter?"

Blackmon says that the HISD representatives in attendance at the committee meeting informed them that out of 85 applications, 36 were screened and they had selected three firms whom they felt were the best candidates for recommendation. Blackmon says that after they evaluated the firms, the majority of the committee had reservations about the fact that two of the three firms recommended were from outside of Houston and that the only African-American firm that was presented was from Ohio.

"We asked to see more local firms," said Blackmon. "There was no way that I could go along with recommending a firm, even if they are African-American, from another city or state, when I know we have qualified Black firms here in Houston."

Blackmon states that the entire committee voted unanimously, that night, to delay a vote on the three recommended firms and requested that HISD representatives come back to them with some additional local firms to choose from. When the press release came out indicating that a firm had been chosen for Yates, and that it was the African-American firm from out of state, Blackmon felt as if HISD representatives used them to justify a decision that had already been made.

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“As a staunch supporter of the 2012 bond initiative, I truly believed that the HISD administration would have shown the community more respect and given us what we wanted as a community,” said Blackmon. “Now that the bond has passed, instead of us telling HISD what we want them to do with our taxpayer dollars, it seems they are committed to doing what they want and not concerning themselves with us. I plan to continue to speak out on this issue.”

Two of the other schools on the recent list, Booker T. Washington High and Sterling High, had non-minority firms recommended to design them.

Carl Davis, a 1972 graduate of Jack Yates and member of the community selection committee, believes that the selection process used for these architectural firms is totally flawed and completely unfair.

“HISD took 4 ½ hours of my precious time on a weekday to evaluate these firms, when they knew what decision they were going to make before we even walked in the room,” said Davis. “One of the important things about this bond was that it was supposed to create business opportunities and jobs for our communities where we live and pay taxes. When your tax dollars are going to another state, how is that helping the community economically?”

Davis states that 2012 HISD bond election is not starting out in the best interest of the citizens of Houston, who will have the burden of paying for these bonds.

HISD has selected a local African-American firm, Smith & Company Architects, Inc., to build a new facility for South Early College High School. The firm that was selected to build the new Yates campus is Moody-Nolan, a large African-American owned and operated architecture firm, headquartered in Columbus, Ohio.

Five of the latest 12 firms are considered certified M/WBEs, which simply means they are at least 51 percent owned by one of the following groups: African-American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American, Native-American or women. The other seven companies have committed to contracting at least 25 percent of their work to M/WBE consultants.

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“We wanted to ensure that each school community had the opportunity to review the proposals and ask questions,” said Leo Bobadilla, HISD chief operating officer. “The recommended firms represent the best match for each project, taking into consideration the unique perspectives of the parents, staff, and principals who will be working with the architects and HISD staff to redesign their schools.”

To assist in the review and selection process, HISD recently set up a new committee of Houston-area architects, educators, engineers, futurists, lawyers, and building experts to help advise the district on project team selection, facility planning, and design. They solicited the expertise of professors from the University of Houston, Rice University, and Prairie View A&M University schools of architecture.

Typically, the design and engineering of a new school takes 12 to 24 months, with high schools taking more time than elementary and middle schools. Construction time is typically 18 to 24 months, depending on the complexity of the project.