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Community Development Agreement for Canal Side Project Makes Sense by **Andy Reynolds**

Before the Canal Side Development Project is approved, it is critical for the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation (ECHDC) to ensure that the massive public investment in the project will be spent in a way that benefits the communities of Buffalo and the region.

Area organizations such as the Buffalo Urban League, Coalition for Economic Justice, and the Partnership for the Public Good have worked to raise awareness around the Canal Side Development Project and the need for enforceable guarantees to make this the highest quality development project possible. To this end, over 79 community groups have already expressed their support in principle for a legally binding agreement negotiated between community groups and the development oversight body called a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) which would maximize benefits for all parties included.

Although the ECHDC has diligently worked to make the plan for Canal Side into a potentially exciting retail, family, and leisure destination, the plan fails to provide clear guidelines to ensure the \$154 million public dollars subsidizing the project will create public benefits, not just private.

ECHDC recently negotiated a project labor agreement with the AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Department and the Building and Construction Trades Council of Buffalo and Vicinity for Canal Side construction work. This is a step in the right direction that will provide good construction jobs to local workers and ensure quality construction of all public works and infrastructure developments.

There are no guarantees, however, that the subsidies going to Bass Pro and Benderson Development will create quality jobs. Without a binding agreement to ensure the public sees a proper return on its investment, the project may be little more than a give-away of millions of public dollars to Bass Pro and Benderson.

Bass Pro will receive \$35 million in subsidies not including additional public subsidies in the form of Empire Zone and IDA funding. Despite the current recession, Bass Pro is still grossing an average of \$1.9 billion dollars annually. Is giving large public subsidies to a national retailer the best way to create jobs and economic development for our region? Certainly developers who are receiving such large public support can provide something in return that benefits the community in a tangible way.

Given the current recession and Buffalo's 30-year economic decline, it is critical that we spend our economic dollars wisely. A CBA with specific, enforceable standards ensuring that the Canal Side Project creates decent jobs workers can afford to live on, promotes local businesses, includes local hiring goals for women and minorities, as well as affordable housing and green design requirements is a proven, successful economic development tool that has been successful in seventeen other cities, including Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, and Milwaukee.

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