

Armory Battle is Just The First Round

Ruben Diaz Jr. and Stuart Appelbaum

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The City Council's December decision to turn down the Kingsbridge Armory project has been described as a stunning blow to developers. Crain's editorialized that "there are only losers here" ("An unmistakable political shift," Jan. 4). But the council's action was hardly a rejection of development. Instead, it was long-overdue recognition that when tax dollars are used to promote private enterprise, the public has the right to expect something in return: good jobs at good wages. That's what a municipal living-wage law would guarantee, and that's why we need to make 2010 the year to put it on New York's agenda.

Compelling businesses that receive public dollars to offer good wages has been in the mainstream of urban policy for well over a decade. The movement began in 1994 in Baltimore and has since spread to more than 145 cities and counties.

Here in New York, a living-wage ordinance would be a valuable tool in reducing poverty among workers in one of the fastest-growing sectors of our economy: the retail industry.

As we pointed out during the Kingsbridge Armory debate, currently three in five New York retail workers earn an hourly wage of \$13 or less, and 44% earn less than \$10 an hour. Contrary to popular misconceptions, these aren't teenagers: 78% are 25 years of age or older, and more than a third of them are their family's sole provider. Given the dimensions of the crisis facing these women and men, the question isn't whether New York ought to use its leverage to raise retail worker wages; it's why we aren't already doing it.

There is no question that New York needs new jobs. Today, the unemployment rate in the Bronx stands at 13.4%—and that's not counting the thousands of workers who have only part-time or temp work. But the key to rebuilding the middle class in the Bronx isn't the creation of more poverty-wage retail jobs. At a time when almost 60% of the borough's residents receive some form of public assistance, we can't focus simply on putting people to work; we need to put them on a path to self-reliance and economic independence.

City government should always be willing to partner with business to create new jobs, but we can never afford to be a silent partner. With the Kingsbridge battle behind us, it's clearly time for New York to adopt a living-wage law. In the weeks and months ahead, we'll be working to bring unions, community groups, clergy, and elected officials together to help make that happen. But until it does, we can only hope that developers learn the lesson of Kingsbridge: that the City of New York will stand up for them, but only if they agree to stand up for the people of New York City.

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