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Councilman Urges Developer to Employ Fair Wage Practices in Williamsburg

By Serena Dai



Councilman Stephen Levin, pictured here at a rally in August 2014, sent a letter to developer JDS Development Group reminding them to hire safe contractors and pay fair wages.

WILLIAMSBURG — Councilman Stephen Levin has joined a chorus of union-friendly elected officials who are asking a well-known Manhattan developer to follow safety and fair wage rules, according to a letter.

JDS Development Group — a firm known for using non-union labor on high profile projects — is planning to build a three-story condo with retail at 71 North Seventh St. in Williamsburg, in Levin's district.

Levin, of the 33rd District, wrote a letter last week to JDS Development Group's Michael Stern, saying that he wants JDS to use safe subcontractors and pay workers fair wages.

"I am hopeful that you will make every effort to develop strong safety protocols, ensure that all workers on site are properly trained, and require your contractors and subcontractors to pay all workers fair wages and benefits," Levin wrote.

The company, behind a tower billed as "the world's skinniest skyscraper," has talked about using non-union workers for its major developments, drawing the ire of union Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York.

Multiple officials, including Public Advocate Letitia James, Councilman Corey Johnson and Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, have stepped into the battle between the union and JDS by writing letters to the company, urging it to practice safe development with fair-wage workers.

Levin's office said they were notified of JDS's plan to build a condo in the district by building trade unions. They have not received a response from Stern, a spokesman said.

Levin declined to say what specific practices by JDS prompted him to write the letter.

Like other officials who are speaking out against JDS, the councilman was endorsed by several unions in past elections and has previously been vocal about using union labor.

JDS insists that it is safe and fair in its development practices, a spokesman said.

"JDS has strong safety protocols, ensures all workers receive proper training, and requires all contractors and subcontractors to pay workers a fair wage," a spokesman said in a statement.

But history says otherwise, said Gary LaBarbera, president of the Building and Construction Trades Council.

The company has more than 14 Department of Buildings violations and more than \$18,000 in fines for unsafe working conditions at a property at 210 W. 18th Street, according to records.

Stern has also built many Manhattan luxury towers without using union labor, according to Crain's.

"He's not concerned with the safety of the workers," LaBarbera said. "He has this kind of model where he gets everything and the workers get nothing."

Levin didn't ask JDS to work with union workers in his letter but did ask the company to "carefully review" the history of any contractors hired, in addition to providing a fair wage for all workers.

"We're supportive of making sure that every site is safe and making sure that people are able to [make] a living wage in New York City," Levin said. "It's always an important thing."