

Camden offers training amid construction boom

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CAMDEN - Micah Cook had a request for the dignitaries assembled in Camden's Waterfront Technology Center Thursday: "Is it cool if I get a selfie of everybody so I can motivate my neighborhood?"

Mayor Dana Redd, Cooper University Hospital Chairman George E. Norcross III, Council President Frank Moran and others laughed, but Cook was serious – he ran back to his seat, grabbed his phone and snapped a photo.

City and county officials hope his story will be replicated across Camden, and more of Cook's fellow city residents will take advantage of the Camden Construction Careers Initiative, a new effort to train workers, giving them an opportunity to participate in the city's recent economic boom.

In a phone interview Wednesday, Norcross stressed the need not only for jobs in a city beset by poverty and unemployment, but also for training: "There's probably \$2 billion in construction that hasn't even begun yet in Camden," said Norcross, a powerful force in South Jersey politics. "We need to make sure Camden residents are part of that, but if they aren't trained, they can't get these jobs."

Norcross called the initiative, offered through the Union Organization for Social Service (UOSS), "an affirmative approach" to getting residents good jobs.

"We know that there aren't that many city residents who are members of the trade unions," Norcross said. "To increase participation and get people union jobs, we need to train them."



Cooper University Chairman George E. Norcross III talks about the Camden Construction Careers Initiative. (Photo: PHAEDRA TRETHAN/Staff photographer)

The initiative will train more than 100 city residents in small, 10-week class cycles through the end of 2017. Participants will receive training in a variety of disciplines, including bricklaying, carpentry, and more; they will also receive training in financial literacy, computer literacy and work site safety.

At the end of the training period, participants will interview with union representatives for placement in apprenticeships.

The initiative will also focus on building relationships between the city's new big businesses, such as Holtec International, Subaru and the Philadelphia 76ers, and its small businesses.

Every household in Camden will receive a letter in English and Spanish in the coming days, outlining the program and four job fairs and information sessions later this month.

Funding will come through a variety of sources, including \$160,000 from the City of Camden, as well as funds from Cooper's Ferry Partnership, Liberty Property Trust (which plans a massive mixed-use development on Camden's Waterfront), Rutgers University and Rowan University, and others, said Cooper Foundation President Susan Bass Levin.

Redd pointed Thursday to Cooper University Hospital as a model for offering opportunities to Camden residents as it expands its footprint, adding a medical school and a cancer center in recent years.

"Camden residents are putting in the sweat equity to revitalize the city they love," Moran added. "Things are happening."

Cook, who trained as a painter and worked on projects including East Camden Middle School and the Battleship New Jersey, talked about the value of the training he received.

"My dad is proud of me, my family and my kids. ... That's all I can ask," he said.

Norcross acknowledged he's been part of many announcements heralding change in Camden over the years. This time, he said, is different.

"For decades and decades, we've consistently heard the question from community leaders: How will this benefit the residents of Camden?" he said Wednesday.

Sporting the beginnings of beard Thursday that he said would remain as long as the Eagles don't lose, he repeated – and acknowledged as true – the criticism that city residents have too often been left out.

"You can have 2 or 5 billion dollars in new construction, but if you don't have people properly trained, there are no opportunities."

"In the last number of months, the city administration has decided to create these opportunities."

Citing Holtec as a leader in training city residents, he added, "If we can't provide opportunities for people who live here, we're not succeeding at what we're doing."

Charles Little, an East Camden resident, spoke afterward about some of the false starts of the past.

"I get it," said the 46-year-old father of four. After months of unemployment, he trained for a job with Joseph Jignoli & Son Construction, one of the contractors working to build Holtec's huge new manufacturing and office complex in South Camden.

“I feel like it’s changed now,” he said.

Unemployment can lead to hopelessness for people like him without a college degree, he admitted, and said he worked hard not to succumb to it.

“Sometimes things don’t work out the way you think they will, but you can try to right the ship.”

The job, he said, has helped him “give my children options in life.”

“I got my hard hat and safety goggles and I was off and running,” he smiled.

MORE INFORMATION

Information sessions will take place at the following locations: Catto Community Family School, 6-8 p.m. Sept. 20; Malandra Hall Community Center, 10 a.m.-noon Sept. 22; Charles Sumner Elementary School, 6-8 p.m. Sept. 28; and Pyne Poynt Middle School, 10 a.m.-noon Sept. 29.

For more on the Camden Construction Career Initiative, call (856) 757-9154 or email info@camdencareer.com