

BLACK BUILDERS, CONTAMINATED LAND, AND THE BILLION-DOLLAR BETRAYAL: SAN FRANCISCO'S FIGHT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

By Malik Washington
Destination Freedom Media Group & The Davis Vanguard



Top (left to right): Oscar James and James Richards
Bottom: (left to right): Willie Ratcliff and Dennis Williams, Jr. (front right)

**Recognizing & Celebrating
Black Women in the
Construction Trade**



Yolanda Jones: Celebrating a Black Queen and a BOSS!

<https://sfbayview.com/2021/03/yolanda-jones-celebrating-a-black-queen-and-a-boss/>

Photo credit: S.F. public housing tenants rally at City Hall, urging Mayor Lurie to step up

<https://missionlocal.org/2025/07/s-f-public-housing-tenants-rally-at-city-hall-urging-mayor-lurie-to-step-up/>

A recent report by the U.S. Navy confirmed what residents of Bayview–Hunters Point have long feared: dangerously high levels of radioactive materials — including Plutonium-239 — remain buried deep within the soil of the former Hunters Point Naval Shipyard.

This revelation, first brought to light by the San Francisco Chronicle, is more than an environmental scandal — it's a moral reckoning. It exposes a catastrophic failure of oversight, accountability, and basic humanity. For decades, the very agencies entrusted to protect the people — OCII, MOHCD, and CMD — have instead protected the interests of billion-dollar developers.

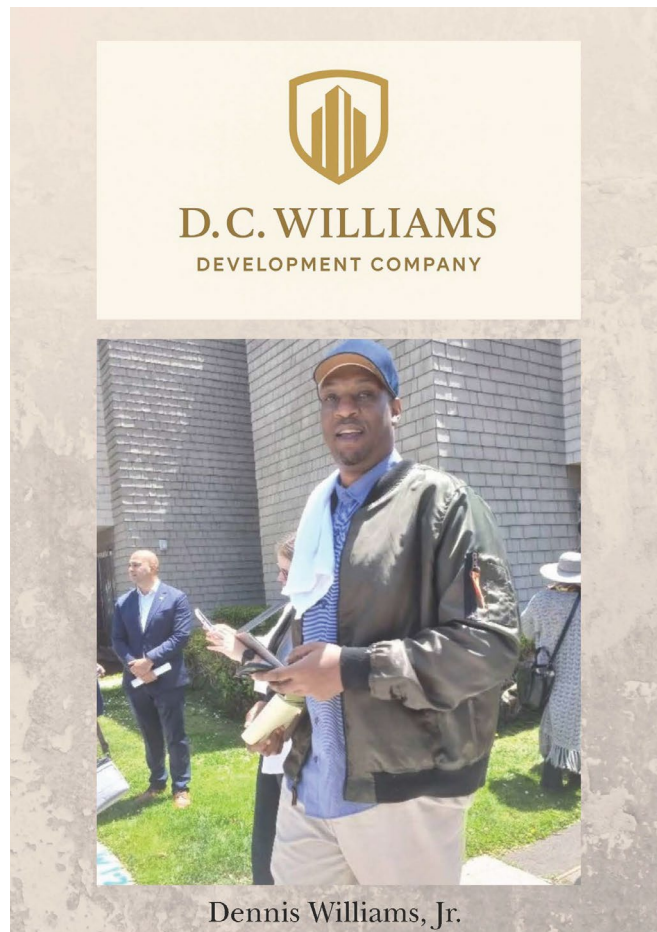
This is not redevelopment. It is re-poisoning. And at its core lies a betrayal not just of public health — but of economic justice.

The Warning Ignored

For years, environmental scientists, whistleblowers, and community activists have raised the alarm that construction was advancing on toxic ground. The warnings were clear. Yet City Hall allowed the bulldozers to roll.

Instead of halting the process, the City continued to greenlight Lennar and Five Points Holdings — out-of-state mega-developers with billion-dollar portfolios and zero accountability to the community they claim to serve.

These corporations reap enormous profits from public land while excluding Black developers, contractors, and workers who built San Francisco with their own hands. This betrayal has metastasized into the DNA of City government itself.



Dennis Williams, Jr.

A Voice for Accountability: Dennis Williams Jr.

Dennis Williams Jr., Executive Director of the Fillmore Community Development Corporation and Principal of D.C. Williams Development Company, has emerged as one of the strongest voices for accountability in this new fight for justice.

In a formal letter to City leadership, Williams wrote:

> “This is not simply a matter of environmental remediation — it is an issue of justice, equity, and community survival. The continued marginalization of qualified Black developers and residents from a \$24 billion redevelopment project in their own community is unacceptable.”

Williams’ words cut through bureaucratic spin and expose the rot beneath City Hall’s glossy press releases. While agencies boast about “equity initiatives,” Black San Franciscans remain locked out of the very opportunities created to rebuild their neighborhoods.

The LBE Failure: Equity in Name Only

The City’s Local Business Enterprise (LBE) program was designed to expand inclusion. But as community advocates have testified, it has become a gatekeeping system that benefits consultants and subcontractors — not developers.

“Most of the LBE program in San Francisco is geared toward subcontractors, consultants, and service providers — not directly to real estate developers,” reads a recent community statement. “It’s been four years since this failure was identified, yet nothing has been created by the Contract Monitoring Division or the Board of Supervisors.”

Despite billions in public dollars flowing through City Hall, Black developers remain systematically excluded. The absence of partnership requirements, workforce pipelines, or joint-venture mandates with local Black-owned firms is not accidental — it is a form of economic discrimination.

This exclusion violates the spirit — and arguably the letter — of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, and California’s Unruh Civil Rights Act, among other state and federal laws.

The Legacy of Black Builders

Before there were cranes and billion-dollar bonds, there were Black builders who literally built San Francisco.

Men like James Richards, Oscar James, Charlie Walker, and Willie Ratcliff, and pioneering women like Yolanda Jones, didn’t just pour concrete — they poured hope, courage, and self-determination into every foundation.

Their work and sacrifice paved the way for this generation — Dennis Williams, Fred Jordan, Kevin Williams, and Demetrius Williams — strong and intelligent Black men who continue to fight for a seat at the table of opportunity.

They remind us that redevelopment without inclusion is colonization by another name.

Standing Up with the Aboriginal Blackmen United

https://www.sfweekly.com/archives/standing-up-with-the-aboriginal-blackmen-united/article_foeoc2d6-8793-5815-a8be-7caaf766bfff.html

SFO Contractor Put Up Noose, Suit Charges / Incident after complaint filed

<https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/SFO-Contractor-Put-Up-Noose-Suit-Charges-2936900.php> <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/SFO-Contractor-Put-Up-Noose-Suit-Charges-2936900.php>

Workforce goal unmet in construction at SF redevelopment sites

https://www.sfexaminer.com/news/workforce-goal-unmet-in-construction-at-sf-redevelopment-sites/article_8b8724ae-8cd9-5292-a4af-bb11a17bac57.html

How San Francisco was built, one neighborhood at a time

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/oursf/article/A-great-city-builds-1-neighborhood-at-a-time-6404449.php>

Streetwise: Vanished San Francisco

<https://www.opensfhistory.org/osfhrucible/2021/09/>

Charlie Walker, “king” of Bayview Hunters Point, dies at 89

<https://missionlocal.org/2023/02/charlie-walker-obituary/>

The Five Demands for Real Equity

- Suspend all new developer agreements and RFP awards involving contaminated parcels until independent, third-party environmental testing is verified by the public.
- Reform or disband the Community Advisory Committee (CAC), which has failed to represent the community’s true interests.
- Mandate inclusion of certified Section 3-eligible and HUD-registered Black development firms in all major projects.
- Disclose all geotechnical, radiological, and environmental data under NEPA, CEQA, and HUD regulations.

- Create an independent environmental monitoring task force composed of residents, scientists, and community advocates.

These recommendations echo the broader five-point platform proposed by Williams and others: task-force oversight, joint-venture mandates, Title VI audits, workforce pipelines, and enforceable community-benefit agreements.

“True Transformation Begins with Inclusion — Not Displacement”

While the City parades its latest “revitalization” ribbon-cuttings, community leaders warn that progress continues to leave too many behind.

At the groundbreaking for Sunnydale Blocks 7 & 9 and the opening of Amani and Nia, Dennis C. Williams Jr. didn’t mince words:

> “Let’s be honest — it’s shameful that longstanding residents of Sunnydale and District 10 are still not working on these sites, and that no qualified Black micro-developers were engaged in any capacity,” said Williams.

“Equity isn’t a photo op. It’s ownership, opportunity, and justice for the people who’ve endured decades of neglect and displacement. San Francisco cannot call itself equitable while continuing to exclude Black developers and community-based partners from projects in historically Black neighborhoods.”

Williams emphasized that true economic inclusion means giving Black developers, contractors, and residents direct participation in rebuilding their communities — not relegating them to token subcontracting roles.

I, Malik Washington, say this to our community: “We cannot celebrate progress that erases the very people it claims to uplift. Until Black developers and contractors are granted an equal seat at the table — not as symbolic participants, but as full partners in ownership — San Francisco’s talk of equity remains a dangerous illusion.”

Grassroots Strength: ABU, Demetrius Williams, and the Power of Service and Solidarity

While City agencies drag their feet, grassroots organizations like A Better Understanding (ABU) show what genuine community uplift looks like.



Demetrius Williams
President, Founding Member

The SF Hyper Local Building Trades Contractors Collective, is a unique collective dedicated to empowering and supporting Hyper Local contractors to secure contracts on construction projects throughout San Francisco.

For thirty years, ABU has served Bayview residents — distributing food, mentoring youth, and hosting its annual Turkey Giveaway, feeding hundreds of families. They do this without contracts, without millions, and without excuses.

I would be remiss without mentioning the dedicated and amazing work of Demetrius Williams. Demetrius Williams is the President of the San Francisco Hyper Local Building Trades Contractors Collective. Nearly a week ago, I was invited by Dennis Williams, Jr. to attend a meeting between representatives of the construction company Swinerton Construction and members of the Hyper Local Collective. The meeting was held at the Southeast Community Center at 1550 Evans Street, San Francisco (Black contractors contributed greatly to the construction of this amazing building).

As I observed the conversations that took place at the meeting, one point stood out. Demetrius Williams is dedicated to fighting for Black contractors and skilled construction workers. Williams was articulate, passionate, and clear with his message. He represents at least 15 qualified local Black subcontractors. The representatives of Swinerton were Lewis Price, who is a project manager, and Mick Penn, the liaison between Swinerton and the Black contractors. It is noteworthy to mention that Mr. Penn is not from Bayview/Hunters Point and I'm not sure that he understands the deep history of racism and exclusion that exists in regard to Black contractors and construction projects in the City.

I think it is important for the community to know the names of some of these Black contractors who are fighting for inclusion. Let's be clear, when they work **we all work:**

1. CIW & Sons Plumbing
2. Sterling Framers

3. Dyna-Electric
4. Better Way Constructors
5. Coast to Coast Drywall
6. Kirkwood Plumbing
7. AJS Painting
8. Dream Works Construction

and last, but not least:

9. DC Williams Development



Oronde Sterling of sterling Framers impressed me with his knowledge, maturity, and vision when it came to seeking inclusion and equity for Black contractors.

He personifies Black Excellence 

(Journalist's note: I apologize if I did not include your company. This is not a definitive list of all Hyper Local members)

I think one of the most important topics that was discussed at the meeting -- from a community standpoint **was the need to mentor and train up and coming building trade employees, both men and women.** There was a man present named **Mr. Carpenter.** He is the father of community organizer and activist Debrey Carpenter. In my opinion, Mr. Carpenter gave a Master's Class on community support

and community development. In regard to mentoring and training our youth to be workforce ready, he said this:

“How am I going to act like a first-class employee when I was programmed and treated as if I was a third-class human being?”

Mr. Carpenter also said:

“In this community, we need more “citizen participation.” We have a right to know what these people (Swinerton) are doing in our community.”

Mr. Carpenter explained that as a master painter, he became a foreman at one of the most racist construction companies in San Francisco. This company, at the time, would not allow him to teach other Black men his trade, so he had to leave **his secure job in order to start his own contracting company so he could train and mentor OUR PEOPLE!**

This, sisters and brothers, is the real story about being a Black contractor or construction worker in the City and County of San Francisco.

My name is Malik Washington, I don't do this work by myself. I have a strong partner and colleague by the name of Gale Washington, and we are very intentional about the journalistic work we do for our community. Women will never be excluded, marginalized or ridiculed in anything that we do. I say that so that everyone understands that without women in the building trades, there can be no conversation about inclusion and equity.



Sistas With Tools - <https://www.sistaswithtools.org/> This is there mission statement:

“Sistas with Tools, in collaboration with the San Francisco Building Construction Trades Council and their affiliate unions, is a pre-apprenticeship program focused on preparing, supporting, and retaining Black and Latina women in unionized construction trades apprenticeships and unionized construction trades careers while providing them with supportive services to ensure that they don’t merely survive, but they thrive.”

As City Hall debates “equity,” the people are already doing the work.

A Call to Conscience and Action

The discovery of Plutonium-239 in Parcel C is not just an environmental emergency — it is a spiritual crisis for a city that claims to champion justice and diversity.

San Francisco must:

- Halt all construction on contaminated land.
- Publicly release every environmental report.
- Implement binding Black-contractor inclusion policies.
- Demand accountability from developers and City agencies alike.

Mayor Daniel Lurie must decide whether his administration will perpetuate the status quo or finally deliver on the promise of equity.

As Malik Washington writes:

> “Justice delayed is justice denied — and our people have waited long enough.”

As always, here’s our song and video for this article:

Sweet Honey In The Rock: More Than A Paycheck

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBOXZf8vIF4&list=RDIBOXZf8vIF4&start_radio=



Dennis Williams (right), Kevin Williams (behind Dennis), Randy Williamson (top), Oronde Sterling (behind Malik). Meeting of the San Francisco Hyper Local Building Trades Contractors Collective, Southeast Community Center, 1550 Evans Avenue, San Francisco.

Malik Washington is a freelance journalist and Director at Destination: Freedom and Destination Freedom Media Group. For over 13 years, Malik has been a published journalist and news reporter focusing on criminal justice issues, conditions of confinement in jails and prisons, as well as hot-button political issues. You can reach him via email: mwashington@destination-freedom.org or call him at (719) 715-9592.

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