

Wollman Rink food and beverage contracts can bolster women- and minority-owned businesses

BY MELBA WILSON AND LIZ NEUMARK

The city is finally reawakening. People are flocking back to restaurants and dining alfresco. Museums have reopened their doors for exciting new exhibitions. Our sports teams are performing live again in front of fans. Bruce Springsteen is back on Broadway.

Although there is much to celebrate as more people are getting vaccinated, we'd be remiss not to correct the inequalities and flaws exacerbated and exposed by the pandemic, particularly in the food and beverage industry.

The city represents more than 150 cuisines from around the world, with approximately 60% of our restaurant workforce made up of immigrants. Most restaurant owners operate small, local businesses embedded deep within their neighborhoods. They consistently experience, however, a lack of investment and support from the financial community. They are overburdened with regulation, and they struggle with navigating complex and overlapping government agencies.

All of this makes it increasingly difficult for small women- and minority-owned restaurants to get off the ground. It's one of the main reasons only 3.5% of city businesses are owned by Black entrepreneurs, despite the Black community making up 22% of the city's population. As we continue our recovery, our civic, elected and business leaders should prioritize projects that can support small businesses and prioritize inclusion and diversity during and post-pandemic.

Smooth skating

Take for example the revitalization of a city gem, Wollman Rink. The Parks Department issued a request for proposals seeking an operator with the resources and knowledge to transform the rink to live up to its true potential as a cultural destination that New Yorkers from every borough can visit and afford time and again. Its recommendation of Wollman Park Partners, a coalition of New Yorkers who have pledged to keep none of the profit and make workforce development and access a cornerstone of its proposal, is the type of partnership we need.

The Wollman partnership recognizes the critical importance that food and beverage companies will play in making Wollman a culturally vibrant and relevant space for all New Yorkers. That's why, as official community partners to the bid, we will find diverse businesses and entrepreneurs from across the city to participate in the food and beverage concession program. True passion for our city is embedded in the heart and soul of small and midsize neighborhood food companies that feed New Yorkers.

By working together, we can help

turn Wollman Rink into a platform for these businesses and create a showcase of great flavors, creativity, resiliency, new voices and culinary spirit.

We are also committed to engaging Wollman's supply chain to prioritize Black and minority- and women-owned businesses, something that will help us form a deep pipeline of minority-owned businesses and vendors to work in the

heart of Central Park.

In addition, our plan includes a workforce-development program to educate, train and uplift workers at all stages of the rink's revitalization, including design, construction and operations.

Our leaders should use the revitalization of Wollman Rink as a model for how to correct some of the city's inequalities and open the economic tent to even more neigh-

borhoods, entrepreneurs and New Yorkers simply looking for an opportunity.

Now's the time to move the needle forward and give equity and inclusion the genuine priority they deserve. ■

Melba Wilson is the founder of Melba's Restaurant in Harlem. Liz Neumark is the founder of Great Performances catering company.



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