

■ MIDDLETOWN

Builders group objects to bid specifications

Language for Snow School project criticized

By BILL DALEY
Courant Staff Writer

MIDDLETOWN — The city's decision to include what a statewide construction trade organization views as pro-union language in bidding specifications for the Snow School project has been criticized by the organization's executive director.

Bernard A. Zak of the city-based Connecticut Associated Builders and Contractors Inc. has written to Mayor Maria Madsen Holzberg protesting the incorporation of so-called "project labor agreement" language in the bid specifications.

"Project agreements are against the principles of free enterprise," said Zak, whose group represents nearly 200 construction-related businesses in the state. "They serve only to eliminate competition from contractors whose employees have chosen not to belong to a union."

But Mary Palladino, the mayor's administrative assistant, said that city contractors who do not use union labor will not be excluded from the project. The bid specification calls for all labor — including nonunion workers — used for the project to be referred through union halls. But nonunion workers can be hired if they qualify for specific jobs and sign up at a union hall, Palladino said.

Zak said awarding the project to the lowest responsible qualified

bidder would save upward of 10 percent of the project's cost because, he contends, open shops can be more economical.

"The biggest problem is that 80 percent of the construction work force in this state are open-shop contractors," Zak said Wednesday. "There are open-shop contractors living in Middletown being excluded because they opted not to belong to any union."

Zak accused Holzberg of back-room politics, saying she should have taken the issue to the common council, at the very least, for discussion. Holzberg was unavailable for comment.

Palladino said the decision to go with a project labor agreement was "to insert a measure of quality control" into school projects. She said that only one of the city's school renovation projects performed by an open shop has come in at-budget and on time, while similar projects in other municipalities with labor agreements have come in under budget and on schedule.

That such a bid clause would cost the city more is a popular misconception, Palladino said. The wording freezes wages and benefits at the state's prevailing rates for the life of the project, she said.

Shawn Cashman, president of the Connecticut State Building and Construction Trades Council, said project labor agreements have been around for 60 years. They guaran-

tee prevailing wages apply, that common working hours and vacation time are followed and that continuity at the project is assured, he said.

George Dunn, chairman of the Snow School building committee, said members have neither voted for nor against inclusion of the language in the bid specifications, but he said concern was voiced about whether this is something the city or the committee should have done.

Work on renovating Snow School is scheduled to begin this summer. The project calls for construction of a new main building linking the gymnasium and auditorium, and eliminating the classroom "pods" now scattered across the Wadsworth Street property.

Bids to execute the renovation project are scheduled to be opened Tuesday.

Deborah Wilcox-Loos, purchasing director, said 72 sets of bid specifications have been distributed. She acknowledged receiving some complaints from contractors about inclusion of the project labor agreement language in the document.

Bids for school project opened

Low offer is \$600,000 over architects' budget

By BILL DALEY
Courant Staff Writer

MIDDLETOWN — A Stratford-based company was the low bidder on the Snow School renovation project, but the price was still over budget.

Of **four bids** opened Tuesday, Salce Contracting Associates Inc. was the low bidder at **\$9.11 million**, Mayor Maria Madsen Holzberg said. C.R. Klewin Construction of Norwich's bid of \$10.95 million was the highest.

Holzberg said Salce's price is **\$600,000 more than the amount the architects budgeted for construction work.** "We're going to need to sit down and see what the situation is," Holzberg said.

The project calls for construction of a new main building for the school, connecting the gymnasium and auditorium, and dismantling the classroom "pods" now scattered across the Wadsworth Street parking lot.

Holzberg stood fast in her decision to include language in the bid

specifications that was viewed as pro-union by Bernard Zak, director of the Connecticut Associated Builders and Contractors Inc., a statewide construction trade organization.

This language, known as a "project labor agreement" ensures a measure of quality control over the project, Holzberg said, and doesn't preclude the involvement of local workers and local firms as Zak alleges.

Zak reiterated his objections in a letter to the mayor Tuesday. He said such clauses force nonunion contractors to negotiate with unions and abide by their rules.

"We do not believe in forced unionism," Zak said.

With non-union shops unwilling to bid on projects containing such a clause, Zak contended, contractors who do bid can jack up their prices.

"Does your allegiance lie with the taxpayers of Middletown to see they get the best for their tax dollar or is it to organized labor?" Zak asked.

Snow going out for bids again

By MARY BETH WISNIEWSKI

Middletown Press Staff

MIDDLETOWN — Fate has once again reared its ugly head on the **Wilbert Snow Elementary School renovation** project.

After school officials had to face the referendum in December, problems with the legal posting of the referendum in January

and an unexpected Planning and Zoning public hearing in May, they now have to confront bidding out the \$9.3 million project — again.

During Tuesday's Board of Education meeting, board member Edward McMillan Jr., who serves on the Snow School Building Committee, reported that the project, which was set to break ground Aug. 1,

will be delayed for at least more two months.

"The estimates on the bids (the first time around) came in about 10 percent above budget," he said. "Only 13 bids packets went out and only five bids came in."

McMillan feels part of this low turnout was due in part to the Project Labor Agreement put on the bidding process by

Mayor Maria Madsen Holzberg last month. This called for union-only general contractors to bid on the school project. The bids were due in by the middle of July, with construction set to begin Aug. 1.

"The process is now we are rebidding the project," he said. "The time of doing this (demolishing the main portion of the school) around the school year isn't going

to happen."

The new school year begins Aug. 28. The revised schedule for the renovation project, which was cut by \$500,000 by the mayor and the architect, Jeter, Cook & Jepson, now includes awarding the bids during the first week of October, with construction beginning soon thereafter.

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Snow School project must be sent out for bids again

Project is delayed at least two months

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The entire project is slated to be completed in December 1998 — also two months later than originally anticipated.

"This is a sad situation for everyone," McMillan said. "Everything was moving along quickly."

In hopes of bringing in lower bids the second time around, Holzberg said the architects reduced the pricetag of the project by \$500,000, eliminated the Project Labor Agreement, and changed some of the add/delete portions of the projects — cost reductions that could be later added in if funds are available.

"Certainly by doing all three of these things should result in a

lower bid," she said. "But how much is attributable to the Project Labor Agreement, we'll just have to see."

Local non-union contractors argued that the labor agreement would result in higher bids, therefore hiking up the price of the project.

"But if the bids are high again, the fact is that the timing wasn't right, the construction workers are busier than they have been in the past, or that the architect's estimates were incorrect," Holzberg said. "Or it could be timing. I know it may be ridiculous, but they (the bids) were open in the morning. They may have been better if they were opened in the afternoon. That's what I've been told."

The first phase of the renovation

of the 42-year-old school, on Wadsworth Street, included demolishing the main portion of the building except for the present preschool, auditorium and gymnasium. A multi-level classroom will be constructed in its place.

The second phase will include tearing down five separate classroom buildings, or pods.

The new construction will link the new classrooms to the existing structures.

Come next week, school officials said children will not be in harm's way of the old building, which was fenced off last weekend.

"This project was Murphy's Law from the beginning," Superintendent David H. Larson said.

City's Snow School project advances

By MANON L. MIRABELLI

Middletown Press Staff

MIDDLETOWN — The Snow School building project came closer to reality when school officials chose a bid of more than \$7 million for the work recently.

After a second round of bids, the city awarded the contract late last week to

contractor Haynes Construction of Seymour, saving taxpayers more than \$1 million from the bids in the first round.

The controversy led to a low turnout of bidders with price tags soaring over budget which necessitated a second bidding process.

Lisa Puorro, a member of the Snow School Building Committee, said at its

Oct. 10 meeting, the committee moved to approve Haynes' low bid of \$7.8 million. She also said the committee had the opportunity to review the offers of about 10 construction companies in the second-round bids as opposed to the "low number" of contenders for the job in July.

Construction on Snow School should begin sometime at the end of the month,

Schools Superintendent David H. Larson said. According to building agreements, construction usually starts about 30 days from the time the contract is signed.

Puorro said the Building Committee is projecting students and staff will be able to move back into the school in January 1998, with the landscaping to be com-

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Snow School plan advances

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plete by April 1998.

The question of what brought the reduction in the project cost drew different answers from different people involved in the work.

Bernie Zak, executive director of Associated Builders and Contractors, said it was through the construction association's efforts that Middletown taxpayers have saved \$1.31 million on the Snow School building project. The trade association, representing the open-shop construction industry, opposed Mayor Maria Madsen Holzberg's

attempt to include in the July bid offers a project labor agreement which mandated that only union labor could be used to build the school.

Zak said when he became aware of the project labor agreement, he contacted all the non-union bidders, made them aware of the situation, and asked them to withdraw from the bidding process.

Zak charged that Holzberg never brought the issue to the Common Council or Building Committee, but took it upon herself to make Snow School a union-only project.

Building gets bids that fit budget

Middletown to act on Snow School job

By STACY WONG
Courant Staff Writer

MIDDLETOWN — The city on Friday received bids for the Snow School renovation that fell within the project's \$9.8 million budget.

This is the second round of bids on the project — previous bids submitted were high, with the lowest bid at \$9.11 million made by Salce Contracting Associates Inc.

That bid was about \$600,000 more than the architects at Jeter Cook & Jepson had budgeted for construction.

The project calls for construction of a new main building connecting the gymnasium and auditorium, and dismantling of the classroom pods.

This time, the apparent low bidder was Haynes Construction of Seymour at \$7.8 million; the next highest was W.J. Mountford Inc. of South Windsor at \$8.069 million; and the next highest was Lawrence Brunoli of Farmington at \$8.113 million.

There were 10 bidders in all, with the Salce company this time making the high bid at \$8.527 million.

The bids will be reviewed by the city purchasing department and the project architects, which will also help check out company references.

City purchasing director Deborah Wilcox-Loos said the department and the architects hope to complete the review by the building committee's next meeting on Thursday so a recommendation can be made to the committee.