

Long Beach Press Telegram

A misguided jobs plan

City can do more for the low-income without a project labor agreement.

Monday, August 01, 2005 - The city of Long Beach has taken some heat in the past for not seeing to it that tax-financed construction projects include jobs for local low-income residents who need the work. Some of the criticism is deserved.

But some politically ambitious members of the City Council are responding in exactly the wrong way. They are using the issue to try to toss a favor to some of their campaign backers.

The favor would penalize nonunion contractors by adopting what is known as a project labor agreement (PLA). This would do little for low-income locals, but it would give labor unions a lock on city construction projects.

Except to a politician looking for a union's support, this makes no sense. If city officials want contractors to hire more local people, they should just demand it, monitor it, and reward results. Sadly, that's much easier to say than to do. The reason more low-income people aren't hired is that they aren't qualified for the jobs and aren't even good candidates for apprenticeships.

Locking a PLA into law doesn't change that one bit. What it would change is to require all bidders on major city construction projects to use only union members or pay into a union trust fund. Most nonunion contractors (80 percent are nonunion) don't find this either palatable or practical.

The result is fewer bids and significantly higher costs, which is good for unions and their favored politicians, but bad for taxpayers.

One of the arguments in favor of a PLA (from a union spokesman, of course) was that it would lower costs by requiring that more apprentices be hired. This is ludicrous on its face. If it were cheaper to hire more apprentices, all contractors would do it without any directives from City Hall (or union leaders).

Dennis Rockway, advocacy director for Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, argues passionately in favor of hiring more local people of low income. His criticism of past practices and his pleas for change resonate with people of good will.

But, understandably, he downplays the difficulties. These are, to name just a few, that although Long Beach has one of the highest levels of poverty in the nation, the low-income labor pool consists largely of illegal immigrants, who can't be hired legally; high school dropouts, and the functionally illiterate, none of whom would qualify for jobs or traditional apprenticeship programs, union or otherwise.

Is this a hopeless cause? Not at all. As Rockway has pointed out, the Alameda Corridor train expressway project succeeded, thanks to capable oversight, in training and finding jobs or apprenticeships for more than 200 Long Beach residents. That may not seem like a thrilling result for a \$2.4 billion project, but, considering the challenges, it was a real accomplishment.

The city of Long Beach could do something similar. But not with the hindrance of a project labor agreement.