

San Diego continues paying price for job-killing PLAs

By ERIC CHRISTEN

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California is facing economic disaster.

Unemployment stands at 12.4 percent. The state is facing un-ending multi-billion dollar deficits. The city of Vallejo has declared bankruptcy and other cities and counties are considering following suit. But that hasn't stopped Big Labor lobbyists from pushing costly, job-killing special interest Project Labor Agreements (PLAs) that will cost hard-working taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars. The problem for San Diego is that local union bosses are trying to make an art of it.

Project Labor Agreements are special interest kickback schemes that end open, fair and competitive bidding on public work projects. PLAs deny nearly 85 percent of California's construction workforce the ability to do public work projects, reducing competition and significantly driving up costs to taxpayers. With government budgets stretched to the breaking point and essential services being cut, it is critical that taxpayers get the best quality work at the best price. Always. PLAs put special interests ahead of the public interest by restricting the bidding process to ONLY contractors backed by big labor unions -- denying others the opportunity to do a better job at a better price.

This is an outrage -- especially in San Diego where unemployment in the construction industry stands at an astounding 25 percent. Big Labor is pushing for special interest PLAs on San Diego's new City Hall, downtown library, Convention Center expansion, new Charger stadium, and the latest Chula Vista bay-front project. San Diego has already paid the price of costly PLAs.

Last year, Gaylord Entertainment withdrew its plan to build a \$1 billion resort and convention center in Chula Vista after being blackmailed by Big Labor. The owner was told to agree to a PLA or face the threat of costly lawsuits. Gaylord spent three years and millions of dollars trying to bring 2,000 construction jobs and millions in annual revenue to the region (couldn't we use those about now?) but finally threw up its hands and moved the project to Mesa, Ariz.

Unfortunately, PLAs raise ethical concerns. After getting \$400,000 in union political contributions, three San Diego School Board members voted to impose a PLA on SDUSD's \$2.1 billion Proposition S construction bond. Rather than spending money for better schools, more classrooms and more educational opportunities for our children, three of the board members -- Shelia Jackson, Richard Barerra and John Lee Evans -- voted to spend more money on higher construction costs.

Just last week the extent of the damage became evident. The first project to go out to bid with a PLA had 66 percent less bids than another San Diego School District project without a PLA kickback scheme attached to it. Worse yet, the bid was 35 percent over budget. To add insult to injury, the job was awarded to a bidder from Los Angeles. So much for the "local hire" propaganda pushed by PLA proponents.

Taxpayers demand and deserve the best quality work at the best price. Denying the vast majority of San Diego firms the opportunity to even bid on projects makes no sense. Only fair and open competition can ensure taxpayers get the best bang for their buck.

Fortunately, taxpayers in San Diego have the opportunity to end the special interest kickback schemes. In 2010 there are no fewer than four entities in San Diego County who will be voting to ban PLAs and codify into law support for open competition.

The cities of Chula Vista and Oceanside will have measures on the June ballot. We are also currently working with the San Diego County Board of Supervisors to do the same thing. And in the city of San Diego, California's second largest city, we are currently collecting signatures that would amend the city charter to protect taxpayers from these costly backroom deals. We need to collect 100,000 valid signatures by the end of April to have this placed on the November ballot. You can help to accomplish this by going to reformsandiego.com.

Help us protect taxpayers by putting the public interest ahead of the big labor special interests that have harmed working men and women, taxpayers, children, and the business climate for too long.

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