

County scraps proposed labor pact
Union rules would have guided courts project
Tuesday, June 20, 2006
Robert Vitale

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Franklin County is shelving a proposed agreement that would have required nonunion contractors to observe union rules during construction of a new Downtown courts building.

After weeks of controversy that some said was beginning to reignite longresolved tensions in the central Ohio construction industry, county Administrator Don L. Brown said yesterday that he'll recommend commissioners put the deal on hold indefinitely.

"Further thought needs to be put into this," he said.

Commissioners had planned a final vote today on what they called a "good contractor and fair employment agreement" with 16 trade unions. It would have placed all workers on the upcoming project under union contracts, even if they weren't union members.

Critics said it discouraged nonunion companies from bidding on construction contracts worth millions of dollars.

A similar plan for the construction of Franklin County's new minor-league baseball stadium was dropped earlier this month after legislators and potential corporate sponsors threatened to yank funding.

"I think sanity has finally prevailed," Commissioner Dewey Stokes said.

Brown said both projects still will fall under state prevailing-wage laws and four-year-old county rules that require contractors to meet standards for training, safety and workers' benefits.

County officials will continue to discuss further standards with construction-industry representatives, he said, but the courts building won't be held up by the issue.

"Those quality-contractor standards provide a basis everyone can agree on," Brown said. "I'm not sure we can reach agreement on anything else."

Associated Builders and Contractors, a local trade group for nonunion companies, declared victory. The group ran radio and newspaper ads during the weekend encouraging people to call county commissioners.

"I know there has been a lot of controversy stirred up, which is what we wanted to do," said Mary Tebeau, the group's president. "Everything was going on behind the scenes."

James Rarey, secretarytreasurer of the Columbus/ Central Ohio Building and Construction Trades Council, also welcomed the county's decision.

"I've never seen anything create such havoc in my life," he said.

Project-labor agreements have been controversial nationwide.

Generally, they give unions control over who is assigned to work at construction sites. In exchange, unions agree not to stop work over disputes at that project site or elsewhere.

Supporters say the agreements keep projects on time and within budget. Opponents say they restrict competition and drive up costs.

The Ohio Supreme Court struck down a state law banning such agreements in 2002. The U.S. Supreme Court, though, upheld an executive order from President Bush that banned project-labor agreements for federally funded construction projects.

rvitale@dispatch.com