

Close to Home: Project labor agreements are simply good public policy

by Martin J. Bennett

The Press Democrat

July 28, 2017

The Santa Rosa Junior College Board of Trustees in May approved the first steps toward creating a project labor agreement for new construction at the college. Former college Vice President Curt Groninga and former trustee Rick Call, the North Coast Builders Exchange and The Press Democrat editorial board all opposed the board approving a pilot PLA —prior to a decision to adopt a permanent PLA policy.

As a full-time instructor at the college for more than two decades, I strongly support PLAs.

Good public policy must be based on peer-reviewed, empirical research. However, during the JC debate about PLAs, critics chose to ignore the most recent academic research about the benefits of PLAs for the college and the community. It's time to set the record straight.

PLAs apply to large construction projects with complex design and long duration that require many highly skilled workers and coordination among crafts. Negotiated prior to the hiring of workers for a project, PLAs are legally binding agreements between the developer, general contractor and construction trade unions.

PLAs set out the terms and conditions of employment, including hiring procedures, wages, health and retirement benefits, health and safety conditions and work rules. Qualified workers are dispatched from local union hiring halls, and unions agree not to strike or picket during the life of the agreement.

Opponents like the North Coast Builders Exchange and some nonunion contractors claim that PLAs discourage nonunion contractors from bidding, reduce the number of bidders and thus drive up costs. However, in 2016 economist Peter Phillips, a University of Utah professor and visiting scholar at the UC Berkeley Labor Center, published the most comprehensive analysis of PLAs for California community college construction.

Phillips analyzed seven construction projects from 2008-2015 at the College of Marin: three with PLAs and four without. He also conducted a statistical analysis of 88 California community college construction projects with PLAs and 175 without completed between 2007-2016.

Based upon both the College of Marin case study and the statewide statistical analysis, Phillips found that "PLAs do not reduce the number of bidders nor do they raise costs on California community college projects."

A 2011 report by Cornell University School of Industrial Relations researchers emphasized that construction is a seasonal boom and bust industry; contractors are challenged to retain skilled workers and overcome chronic labor shortages. PLAs ensure a steady supply of qualified skilled labor, and the high quality of workmanship makes them cost effective and eliminates costly mistakes; projects are completed on time and within budget and delays due to work stoppages or strikes are avoided. PLAs also standardize contract terms — such as work hours, paid holidays and overtime — for different trades.

PLAs also can mandate a targeted hiring policy requiring that 50 percent or more of workers on a project are local residents.

As a consequence, PLAs address one of the most challenging issues of our time: soaring inequality and the emergence of an hourglass economy with job growth concentrated at the top and the bottom, squeezing the middle.

A four-year apprenticeship provides a pathway for low-income residents in the North Bay to enter a skilled trade and the American middle class. A union journeyman electrician in Sonoma County earns \$98,592 annually plus comprehensive medical and retirement benefits.

In addition, craft unions have developed pre-apprenticeship programs for those with little or no construction experience that teach basic skills needed to qualify for apprenticeship programs. The Marin-Sonoma-Mendocino-Lake Building and Construction Trades Council has developed such a program. SRJC students will be eligible to participate in the pre-apprenticeship program.

PLAs are good public policy. The decision to move forward with a pilot PLA for Santa Rosa Junior College is supported by rigorous academic research and analysis.

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