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ABC winning the PR battle over union-only PLAs

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Associated Builders and Contractors has won the public relations battle over union-only project labor agreements. A 2010 Suffolk University/7 News poll found that 69% of state residents oppose compelling contractors to hire all their workers through unions. Outside Mass., at least 11 states - including Maine and even labor-friendly Michigan - have banned the use of PLAs on state-funded construction projects.

But while we've won on the public relations front, the battle is far from over.

Earlier this year, state Transportation Secretary Richard Davey told a construction group that there would be no PLAs on any of the large bridge projects that were in the pipeline. Upon hearing the news, companies formed the joint ventures that are common on these projects and spend considerable time and money preparing bids.

But last month, just before the bids were due, the Patrick administration reversed itself and announced there would be a PLA on the \$285 million reconstruction of the Whittier Bridge, which spans the Merrimack River connecting Amesbury, Newburyport and Salisbury.

A new video and fact sheet from ABC's national office describes why union-only PLAs are such a bad idea.

The Whittier PLA will result in the vast majority of the Massachusetts construction workforce being shut out of the project. Unionstats.com reports that 80% of Massachusetts construction workers choose not to affiliate with a union. In 2007, Gov. Patrick's then-chief economist and director of economic analysis at the Department of Workforce Development wrote that "the percentage of construction industry union members... might fall in the 15-17% range."

Large public construction projects can be a lifeline in a down economy. A national 8.2% unemployment rate is bad enough, but unemployment in the construction industry was at 14.5% as of late May, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

PLAs aren't about appropriate compensation. Everyone working on public projects - both union and open shop - is already covered under state and federal prevailing wage legislation.

Unions argue that PLAs ensure on-time, on-budget construction by guaranteeing labor peace over the term of a project. Residents of Mass., where the Big Dig was built under a PLA, beg to differ. A Beacon Hill Institute (BHI) study of federal construction projects between 2001 and 2008, a period during which PLAs were prohibited on the federal level, didn't find a single job beset by the labor disputes they are designed to avoid.

When Fall River lifted a PLA on local school projects in 2006, subcontractor bid prices fell by 13% on one project and 15% on another. Another BHI study of Massachusetts school construction found that PLAs added at least 12% to construction costs.

Winning the public relations battle isn't enough. Every time Gov. Patrick, who ran against "the Big Dig culture on Beacon Hill," limits work on large state construction projects to a politically privileged

few, ABC and other organizations that support fair and open competition must work tirelessly to ensure that voters know their tax dollars are being squandered.

Dennis Maguire is chairman of the Associated Builders & Contractors of Mass., Burlington, Mass.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540