



# nerej

## Whittier Bridge project is its own miniature Big Dig

August 15, 2013 - Construction Design & Engineering

Governor Patrick recently vetoed a transportation financing bill because he says its tax and toll hikes don't raise enough money. But the Governor wouldn't need so much revenue if he wasn't needlessly spending tens of millions of dollars by imposing union-only project labor agreements on state construction projects.

PLAs exclude nonunion workers by requiring unions to be the "sole and exclusive" source of all job-site labor. Early in 2012, state Transportation secretary Richard Davey told a construction industry group that no PLAs were planned on large bridge projects then in the pipeline.. Based on his remarks, companies formed the joint ventures commonly used for these large, complex projects. But the administration abruptly changed course just before a key bid submission was due, and announced there would be a PLA on the \$215 million reconstruction of the Whittier Bridge on I-95, which spans the Merrimack River where Amesbury, Newburyport and Salisbury come together.

With open shop firms that represent more than 80% of Massachusetts construction workers barred from participating, the project drew just three bids.. The winning bid was \$292 million.

It's like a miniature Big Dig; before work even began, the Whittier Bridge was \$77 million over budget..

You don't have to be an economist to understand that more competition means lower prices and less competition means higher prices.. When the Patrick administration excluded the vast majority of the Mass. construction industry from working on the Whittier project, the cost soared.

Last year, the administration decided the second phase of reconstruction of the Longfellow Bridge connecting Boston and Cambridge would also be rebuilt using a PLA. Gov. Patrick told the Boston Business Journal that the move would reduce costs.. But when the bids came in, that project was also well over budget before a shovel ever went into the ground.

Patrick said he made the decision based on evidence "from other states.". But 13 states, including Maine and even labor-friendly Michigan, have banned PLAs on state-funded construction projects.

Unions argue that PLAs guarantee labor peace. But a study by SuffolkUniversity's Beacon Hill Institute (BHI) of federal construction projects between 2001 and 2008, when PLAs were prohibited, didn't find a single job beset by labor disputes. Nor could Secretary Davey cite any recent local projects that suffered from labor unrest.

And PLAs don't mean higher pay for construction workers.. The wages of everyone working on public projects - both union and open shop - must comply with state and federal prevailing-wage laws.

Fair and open competition maximizes value.. When government restricts competition to benefit favored groups, the rest of us pay a heavy price.

Tom Descoteaux is the chairman of the Mass. Chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors, Woburn, Mass.

