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Next governor must understand facts about project labor agreements

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At its core, our organization is about promoting fair and open competition in the construction industry. There is no policy that runs more contrary to that goal than project labor agreements (PLAs), which exclude the more than 80% of Mass. construction workers who don't belong to a union from working on a project.

In his State of the Commonwealth address last month, governor Patrick not only touted his use of union-only project labor agreements (PLAs) on state-funded construction projects, he said he could demonstrate the savings from PLAs.

If he can, he'll be the first. Studies by the Beacon Hill Institute at Suffolk University and the Worcester Regional Research Bureau have demonstrated that PLAs dramatically increase project costs. As a result, 17 states, including Maine and even union-friendly Michigan - have banned them on state-funded projects.

Higher costs aren't the only problem with PLAs. They also harm efforts to increase minority participation in public construction projects. The percentage of minority construction workers in Mass. who don't belong to a union is even higher - about 90%.

In 2010 Congressional testimony, Minority Business Enterprise Legal Defense and Education Fund president Anthony Robinson specifically cited PLAs as "disadvantageous to minority-owned construction companies and their desire to employ minority workers." Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter said they create "an environment of economic apartheid."

Unions claim that PLAs eliminate the risk of labor unrest. But another Beacon Hill study looked at federal construction projects built between 2001 and 2008, when a federal PLA ban was in place. They didn't find a single instance in which labor unrest was a problem.

No matter what governor Patrick says, there's not a single viable argument for locking more than 80% of Mass. construction workers out of state-funded projects, reducing competition and increasing the burden on taxpayers. It's unlikely that we will change the governor's mind at this point, but let's work to make sure his successor understands that simple fact.

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