

Labor agreement saves money for San Diego schools

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By Tom Lemmon

midnight, July 28, 2011

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When I was a kid growing up in the South Bay, I remember bringing my progress reports home to share with my parents. Just like many teachers before them and since, my teachers would set goals for me and assess my performance, and my parents would push me to do better. They would identify ways I could work harder to improve my performance, with hopes that my final report card would bring better grades.

The San Diego Unified School District has just issued a progress report on a Project Stabilization Agreement it signed with the San Diego Building Trades Council two years ago. This PSA set out to employ skilled local workers to build and repair campuses as part of a \$2.1 billion construction bond measure.

In the progress report, District Contracts and Compliance Manager George Harris III found that we are making great strides toward hiring local residents and enhancing city schools, though we have not yet reached the finish line. Projects at the district don't often come in under budget. However, to date, the career technical education facilities projects built under the PSA have saved 40 percent of the budgeted costs – taxpayer savings in excess of \$8 million.

Given these tough financial times, it is important to make every public dollar count. This substantial budget savings comes from the unions' efficiencies in work delivery, project coordination and providing a well-trained workforce. In addition, these public dollars do double duty under the PSA, creating good jobs for San Diegans that go right back into local businesses.

More than 560 San Diegans have been put to work. These are not just any jobs. They are high-quality jobs, with good training, health benefits and fair wages, and they provide career opportunities for young San Diegans. These are the kind of strong middle-class jobs that have a ripple effect on the entire local economy.

Our local hiring goals were set very high in the PSA and we still have progress to make. However, through the union referral process, we have more than doubled the number of workers (32 percent of dispatched workers) from area ZIP codes with the highest unemployment and lowest incomes in our city. It is the contractors who have dragged their feet on local hiring – only 14 percent of their core employees are from these disadvantaged areas.

The value of these labor agreements sometimes is not easy to measure. When workers have health insurance, for example, they and their families don't use emergency rooms for basic health care as often, which saves money for everyone. Study after study confirms that local dollars earned by local workers stay within the local economy, providing a benefit to our community.

We still have work to do, particularly to continue increasing the number of local residents hired for the construction jobs. This is hard work and we need everyone on board. We are working closely with the district administrative staff to ensure that contractors and contractors associations do their share under the PSA and assume responsibility to help ensure that local San Diegans get back to work. While we maintain the ability to dispatch new workers when requested by contractors, it's the contractor's responsibility to request from the targeted ZIP codes mentioned in the PSA. The PSA affords contractors the flexibility to utilize their workforce whether union or not; however, contractors ultimately control their core workers and they too must be willing to put their best foot forward and utilize core workers within the targeted areas throughout the district.

Instead, the Associated Building Contractors chose to release a study it funded trying to discredit labor agreements like the PSA. The contractors say these agreements are costly, yet San Diego's progress in its own local school district has shown exactly the opposite. The ABC study cherry-picks extreme cases to make politically motivated points.

The San Diego School District PSA is a job-generating engine, as the progress report shows, and I can't wait to bring home our final report card. Now more than ever, we need good jobs, and it doesn't make sense to attack the few tools we have to create them. Let's work together to make every public dollar count, create good jobs that will bring our economy back and get San Diegans back to work.

Lemmon is the business manager of the San Diego County Building and Construction Trades Council AFL-CIO.

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