

EDITORIAL

SRJC promised to spend 'H' funds on students, not labor

Sonoma County voters demonstrated their abiding respect and support for Santa Rosa Junior College in 2014 when they approved Measure H, a bond act to fund \$410 million in new construction and other projects on campus.

But the SRJC Board of Trustees is on the verge of violating that trust today with a vote that amounts to a giveaway of funds to benefit local labor groups — not students.

The trustees are expected to vote on a proposal to negotiate a project labor agreement, a controversial policy that would require one or more of the Measure H projects be governed by union rules and benefits. While still allowing non-union contractors to bid, all contractors would, in effect, be required to operate as union shops under union oversight, driving up costs. Such policies undermine the competitive bidding process as non-union contractors would be put at a distinct disadvantage and may choose not to compete, posing the real risk of bids coming in higher than they otherwise would.

Let's be clear. This is not about paying workers more. All workers on Measure H projects must be paid a prevailing wage. They will be paid the same with or without a PLA. Voters knew this before they cast votes on Nov. 4, 2014 in support of the biggest bond measure in the county's history. What they didn't know was that a portion of these taxpayers funds would be going toward labor union programs rather than education programs through PLAs, which clearly tip the playing field against non-union contractors.

If Santa Rosa Junior College was going to adopt project labor agreements as part of Measure H construction, that should have been made clear before the bonds went for a vote. Doing it after the fact is a violation of voter trust.

During a meeting with the Editorial Board on Monday, board Chairwoman Maggie Fishman and SRJC President Frank Chong said the proposal calls for negotiating a project labor agreement that would put an emphasis on hiring local

workers, developing apprenticeship programs and controlling costs. We like the idea of a hybrid PLA that would ensure costs would not increase and would create a level playing field for union and non-union contractors. But we doubt whether labor groups would go along with such a deal. County officials tried something similar, and it failed.

The bottom line is these agreements do drive up costs. At a recent SRJC board meeting, the builder of the Lawrence A. Bertolini Student Center — a \$35 million project paid for through a 2002 bond measure — told board members that the costs of his project would have been some \$2.5 million higher if a project labor agreement was in place.

A 2011 study by the National University System Institute for Policy Research of San Diego that looked at 501 school projects in California found something similar. It concluded that the costs of projects with PLAs end up being 13 percent to 15 percent higher. That only makes sense given that non-union contractors would be required to pay into retirement funds, union apprenticeship programs, from which they and their employees are unlikely to ever benefit. Some contractors could end up paying double for the same worker — once to fund their own retirement program and once to fund the union's.

It's because of these inequities and cost concerns that the SRJC board has rejected project labor agreements in the past, and it should reject them again. But we fear that's unlikely this time around given that the board is now dominated by individuals who won seats largely because of the support of labor groups.

The main question is this: What problem is the SRJC fixing by adopting project labor agreements? It has successfully completed landmark projects, such as the 78,000-square-foot Bertolini Student Center and the majestic Frank P. Doyle Library, without them in the past. It doesn't need them now.

The only thing the board will build with PLAs is distrust — particularly among voters.

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