

School board OKs Prop. S labor pact

Campus-project jobs would go mostly to local union workers

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SAN DIEGO — Local union workers would get the bulk of jobs to come from the \$2.1 billion Proposition S bond measure that will renovate campuses throughout the San Diego Unified School District, under a labor agreement the Board of Education approved last night.

Hundreds of construction workers packed the district headquarters to weigh in on the Project Stabilization Agreement that will give workers living in the city's poorest neighborhoods a leg up on jobs, which will come with health insurance and other benefits.

The board voted 3-2 to approve the agreement that would require contractors that bid on Proposition S projects to hire from a pool of union workers living in the county. Some 70 percent of the bond work would go to those living in the district, with inner-city zip codes receiving a priority.

“We are in the middle of this economic crisis. This gives us the chance to provide a shot in the arm to San Diegans – and their families and kids,” board trustee Richard Barrera said.

Seen by many as a coup for the working class and a blow to the construction industry, the decision followed lengthy testimony from construction workers on both sides of the issue.

Some contractors said they would forsake any bond work to avoid having to hire unknown workers.

Contractors may bring three of their own employees to jobs. But other than that, they must hire from the union pool. The agreement does not apply to projects under \$1 million.

“How can I work with employees when I don't know their work ethic? I don't know their compatibility, and I don't know their ability,” said Rick Amison, the human resources director at Pacific Rim Mechanical in San Diego, which employs 500 workers.

Skeptics, including trustees Katherine Nakamura and John de Beck, called the agreement narrow and discriminatory for giving those who live in certain yet-to-be designated neighborhoods priority for employment. They also complained because the contract gives union apprentices first dibs at apprenticeship jobs, with nonunion apprentices eligible for any leftover jobs.

The agreement comes with an escape clause that would allow the district to waive the rules if a project fails to garner at least three bidders.

Negotiated by district officials and union leaders, the agreement generated a months-long campaign that had both sides duking it out in an advertising blitz.

Eric Christen, who has led the opposition campaign, vowed to continue the fight through a recall effort directed at the three trustees who approved the contract: Barrera, John Lee Evans and Shelia Jackson. Christen, executive director of the industry-backed Coalition for Fair Employment in Construction, said the agreement was the worst he's seen.

“You should take a great deal of shame in it,” Christen told trustees.

Voters approved Proposition S in November. It will pay to renovate schools throughout the district – with roughly 200 separate projects. The average project would cost \$9 million and generate 72 jobs. District officials estimate that Proposition S would include 90 projects under \$9 million and 110 projects over \$9 million.