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Chula Vista places 'fair, open competition' measure on June ballot

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By Carlos Rico

Eliminating project labor agreements in Chula Vista got one step closer to reality, as the City Council voted to place a measure on next year's June ballot.

The council passed a resolution Tuesday night that would place a "fair and open competition in contracting" ordinance on the June 8, 2010 ballot.

If the ballot measure is passed, it will amend the city's municipal code and not allow the city or the city's redevelopment agency to fund or contract for public works projects where there is a requirement to use only union employees.

"We are very, very pleased that this will be placed on the ballot June 8," said George Hawkins, president emeritus of the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) San Diego chapter, whose association spearheaded the action and gathered the 10,399 valid signatures that allowed for the initiative to be placed on the ballot.

The measure on the June ballot must receive more than a 50 percent "yes" vote to pass. It was written by the Chula Vista city attorney in a neutral way based on the original ordinance.

"It is now in the voters' hands," Hawkins said.

But Donald Cohen, executive director for the Center on Policy Initiatives, said this initiative is more about blocking union workers and not tackling the "real" issues.

"The City Council should work on a (resolution) that calls for providing health care, hiring local workers and providing decent wages," Cohen said. "This is just politics."

On July 13, the city accepted the valid signatures needed to place any kind of measure on a ballot as stated in election code sections 9114, 9211 and 9215 -- which require the city to certify the results of the signature examination and require the City Council to take action on the item brought forth by the petition's party.

ABC had been trying to collect the signatures for the past two years. Now the group's focus will shift toward Chula Vista voters and campaigning to make sure this measure passes.

"Our task is to make sure the public gets the full story," Hawkins said, adding that the Chula Vista Tax Payers Association endorses this measure. "We want local workers to build publicly funded projects in a fair and competitive way."

Gaylord Entertainment and the city of Chula Vista were negotiating for building a convention center, hotels and other retail space along the city's bayfront about two years ago. Gaylord

eventually pulled out of the deal in part due to a disagreement over who and what type of contractors should be allowed to bid and build the project.

Unions say that a labor agreement helps contractors earn a "fair" salary and guarantee health coverage for themselves and their families, while nonunion contractors say the agreement discriminates about 80 percent of tradesmen, because in San Diego County union workers comprise around 20 percent of the work force.

Nonunion contractors say project labor agreements usually have some sort of stipulation that forces nonunion contractors to pay "dues" for funding union-only health care plans, so it doesn't make sense for nonunion contractors unless they join the union, according to Hawkins.

Hawkins said completing this signature gathering process had nothing to do with the union-versus-nonunion conflict on the Gaylord project specifically, but more to do with future projects in the South County.

Also on the June 8 ballot, the mayor and two council members seats will be up for grabs, as well as the city attorney's position.