

Schools' Prop. S labor pact unveiled

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The long-awaited labor agreement that would dictate employment terms for construction projects funded by the San Diego Unified School District's \$2.1 billion bond measure has finally been released – on the brink of a holiday weekend and just days before trustees are set to vote on the controversial matter.

Posted on the district Web site yesterday, the proposed Project Stabilization Agreement would strive to hand out the majority of construction work to locals, especially those who live within the district; would require contractors to pay for health insurance for workers; and would preclude workers from striking or picketing.

The labor agreement would not apply to projects costing less than \$1 million or to those that attract no more than three bidders. The terms of the contract would be enforced by a project labor coordinator, either a district employee or an independent contractor.

The school board is expected to vote on the agreement at its meeting Tuesday. Initially, trustees were to discuss the document during a "first reading" that was to be followed by a vote at a later session.

Labor supporters praised the district for carving out an agreement that seeks to hire and ensure local workers, including student apprentices. Opponents criticized the district for interfering with contractors' work in ways that, they say, could cost more money, reduce the number of bidders and jeopardize the quality of work.

"This is really great for our local community and for our local economy," said Susan Duerksen, spokeswoman for the Center on Policy Initiatives. "This means that good jobs with health insurance would go to local residents – especially to those who live in some of the low-income areas, which tend to be families whose children attend San Diego schools."

Eric Christen, who has been leading an aggressive campaign to stop any such agreement, said the district document discounts the needs – and professional judgment – of the construction industry.

"It's what we predicted. We see who owns the board," said Christen, executive director of the industry-backed Coalition for Fair Employment in Construction.

Under the proposed agreement, construction workers who live within district boundaries would get priority for hiring. However, other workers could be tapped if it's determined that there are no qualified workers available.

Non-union construction workers would be allowed to take on Proposition S jobs, as long as they

receive the same standard of pay and benefits. Contractors would be required to contribute to funds for employee benefits – unless they have their own benefits program that is equivalent.

Contractors could use a maximum of three of their own employees as “core workforce,” as long as they are county residents.

Negotiated by union representatives and district officials, the proposed agreement has been touted and criticized for months in a blitz of mailers and advertisements via television, radio, e-mail and newspapers.

But such a labor deal would hardly be groundbreaking. In October 2005, when the San Diego City Council approved the 7-acre Ballpark Village project downtown, it worked with labor groups to include union guarantees.

The project, proposed by JMI Realty, the development company of Padres’ owner John Moores, and its partner, Lennar-San Diego Urban Division, called for a “community benefits agreement” that included additional affordable housing and required that the developers pay \$10-per-hour minimum-wage jobs with benefits.

The district’s proposed labor agreement is especially grating to construction interests. The local chapter of Associated General Contractors, a construction trade group, supported Proposition S precisely because it believed there wouldn’t be any union preferences. The trade group became the single biggest supporter to the Yes on S campaign with more than \$180,000 in contributions.

While the agreement was being hammered out, Proposition S projects worth millions of dollars were started, including the installation of new synthetic fields at Morse and Mira Mesa high schools and a new multimedia studio at San Diego High School.