

Long Beach approves historic agreement with unions for city construction projects

By Eric Bradley , Press-Telegram

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A view of Long Beach from Shoreline Drive and the convention center. (Photo: Scott Varley, Los Angeles Newspaper Group)

LONG BEACH >> Union workers will have an easier time getting a job on public construction projects after the City Council approved signing a historic project labor agreement Tuesday more expansive than any other city in California.

The five-year deal with the Los Angeles/Orange Counties Building and Construction Trades Council applies to projects costing more than \$500,000, and

is worth an estimated \$28 million annually.

Dozens of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 11 members packed the council chambers for the 7-0 vote.

Councilwoman Lena Gonzalez first proposed the labor pact in November. She said it would help ameliorate the city's unemployment rate, which is as high as 19.1 percent in her downtown district.

"It's really been a privilege to help lead this, and help support this," Gonzalez said.

A staff review found no similar-sized governments in the state use project labor agreements at a \$500,000 level, though Berkeley and Contra Costa County use thresholds of \$1 million.

The agreement excludes streets and other construction in the right-of-way and requires trade unions selected for project contracts to exert their "best efforts" to hire 40 percent local residents. The category is defined as residing in Long Beach ZIP codes as a first tier, then those living in nearby cities and finally those in Los Angeles and Orange counties. Additional focus is placed on hiring disadvantaged and veteran workers. No worker is required to join a union.

A parade of labor groups, including representatives from the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO and the Teamsters, spoke for more than an hour in favor of the agreement's local hiring, prohibition on work stoppages and other provisions.

One of the few who criticized the measure, Coalition For Fair Employment in Construction executive director Eric Christen, said the agreement is unfair for businesses.

He also questioned why a text of the contract was not available to the public.

"What are you voting on tonight?" Christen asked. "It vexes me greatly."

Tuesday's action authorizes City Manager Pat West to finalize and sign the agreement, now in draft form. Unlike an ordinance, the City Charter does not require the item to return to the council for a second vote.

City staff was unable to determine if bid prices would be higher or lower for projects following the adoption

of the agreement, but administrative costs are estimated at \$280,000 each year.

The federal government considers project labor agreements on a case-by-case basis for construction projects of \$25 million or more.

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Long Beach used a project labor agreement for the airport's \$29 million terminal modernization in 2010.

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