

Board says no to labor accord

School

School work won't include union deal

DAVID RILEY

@RILZD

A board overseeing a massive \$1.3 billion program to modernize Rochester's schools rejected an agreement Thursday to work with local construction unions on the second phase of the project.

The 4-3 decision split the board and was a major departure from the first phase of the project, which included what is known as a project labor agreement. That deal spelled out requirements for union hiring, set goals for putting minority workers and firms to work, and established wages and other rules for the construction project.

After Thursday's vote, board members disagreed on whether the decision to reject a similar labor agreement for Phase 2 will affect project costs or cause unnecessary delays.

Members who voted against the agreement said they were dissatisfied with the results of a program that was supposed to put women and minority apprentices to work on the project. Only five apprentices actually met the bill in Phase 1, said Allen Williams, a board member who works as director of special projects in Mayor Lovely Warren's administration.

In Williams' eyes, that outcome threw the purpose of the entire labor

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Mason Jonathan Roundtree of Rochester cuts block during construction at School 50 during Phase 1.

2013 FILE PHOTO

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agreement into question.

"My feeling is that at this point in time, it didn't pan out," he said after Thursday's meeting. "There's really nothing, no sort of value added. Why do it?"

There were plenty of good reasons, according to Tom Richards, the school modernization board's chairman and Rochester's former mayor, who voted in favor of the labor agreement.

Richards said he understood the disappointment in the apprenticeship program, but he described that as a separate matter. The project labor agreement was responsible for ensuring that Phase 1 of the project met or exceeded much larger goals for hiring hundreds of minority workers and contracting businesses owned by women and minorities, Richards said.

For example, more than 20 percent of the workers on Phase 1 were minorities, Richards said. But without a new labor agreement in place, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to enforce hiring goals for Phase 2, he said.

"I accept the fact that they were dissatisfied with that (apprenticeship) program," Richard said. "That to me doesn't translate to

rejecting the project labor agreement for the whole program. There is this confusion being created here.”

Williams disagreed, saying the board could still enforce hiring goals. Opening up the project to both union and nonunion firms also could spur competition, he argued.

The lack of labor agreement should cause no delay to the project, Williams said, but Richards cautioned otherwise. The board already is seeking bidders to work on the second phase of renovations to Monroe High School, which are supposed to be completed in time for fall 2017.

Having no project labor agreement in the picture will require an addendum to the bidding documents, and nonunion firms that now can bid on the project may ask for an extension of the deadline to do so, Richards said. The project already has run into delays this summer.

A study carried out for the school modernization board found earlier this year that a project labor agreement could ultimately save about \$5 million in construction costs. But Brian Sampson, president of the state chapter of the nonunion Association of Builders and Contractors, said there are potential savings and benefits to opening the job up to potential bidders who don't work with organized labor. “First and foremost, workers regardless of their affiliation — whether they are a union member or a nonunion member — will have an opportunity to work on a project that their tax dollars support,” he said. But David Young Jr., president of the Rochester Building and Construction Trades Council, said he was “really disappointed, to say the least,” in the school modernization board's decision.

The apprenticeship program in question didn't work only on the school modernization program, and it put minorities to work elsewhere in the region, Young said. In any case, unions also were not satisfied with the results, and the program has since been revamped, he said.

Overall minority hiring on the project was “a tremendous success,” Young said.

Assemblyman David Gantt, D-Rochester, forced a delay in legislation authorizing the \$435 million second phase of the school program earlier this summer, saying he also had questions about the minority-business component of the first phase.

Williams said that the other board members who voted against the project labor agreement were Charles Benincasa, who also is the city's finance director; Ineabelle G. Cruz; and Wayne Williams. Voting with Richards were Vice Chairman Bob Brown and Mike Schmidt.

DRILEY@Gannett

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