

SPEAK OUT: Union pressure on city officials costing Quincy taxpayers

By **Ronald N. Cogliano**
Merit Construction Alliance

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QUINCY — A note to beleaguered Quincy taxpayers: Hold onto your wallets! The mess on Wall Street has been described by many as corporate welfare. At Quincy City Hall, it's union welfare.

As Quincy's homeowners and businesses prepare for an increase in their property taxes, they should know that the city is unnecessarily laying the groundwork to raise the cost of construction on the high school project and other city construction projects in the future.

Last month, at the behest of powerful and politically connected labor unions, Mayor Thomas Koch and city councilors appointed a committee to oversee compliance with the city's so-called Responsible Employer Ordinance. The ordinance is a local law written by the labor unions and is intended to give unions a competitive advantage.

Organized labor, upset that work on the city's new high school project was not given exclusively to union contractors, has been on a jihad of sorts, attempting to derail qualified open shop contractors from working on the job by making accusations that these contractors are not complying with the city's REO.

In response to the union shenanigans, Mayor Koch and the City Council capitulated and gave organized labor what it wanted: a five-member committee to oversee compliance of the union-friendly ordinance. The problem is the committee is stacked with two union members.

Imagine for a moment that you want to open a convenience store, but your efforts were resisted by the big chain supermarkets because your competition is a threat to them. The city finds no grounds to keep you from opening your store and reluctantly agrees to allow you to do so.

Now imagine that the city creates a committee to ensure small convenience stores like yours are complying with all local laws and on that committee sit three public officials and two representatives of the big chain supermarkets. Doesn't sound right, does it?

In Quincy, where special interests are trumping the interests of taxpayers, public officials don't bat an eye at this kangaroo court.

The Merit Construction Alliance filed a complaint with the state's Ethics Commission because of the obvious conflict of interest at play here. City Solicitor James Timmons' response: invite a non-union representative to sit on the committee.

Great. Attempt to squelch an ethics investigation of a conflict of interest by adding another conflict of interest. These are exactly the kinds of games that have the public so cynical about their government and why sham committees such as Quincy's REO Compliance Committee just add to the ever popular belief that Massachusetts politics is nothing more than a scandal factory.

If the union-stacked committee has its way, they will toss at least one low-bidding, non-union contractor from the high school project, simply because they are not unionized, and install one of their own to finish the job. That one change will cost Quincy taxpayers \$700,000 – the difference between the low-bidding open shop contractor currently on the job and the next-lowest bidder, a union outfit.

And make no mistake about it, the intent of the committee is not just to eliminate competitive bids from open shop contractors on the high school project. No, the real intent is to discourage competitive bids from non-union contractors on all city construction projects in the future.

Lack of competitive bids drive up construction costs exponentially, while offering no additional benefits. While there are studies that prove this, there are also real life situations that make this statement indisputable.

In 2005, the city of Fall River attempted to limit bidding on its school building projects to only union contractors, who make up only 16 percent of Massachusetts' construction workforce. The resulting bids were millions of dollars over budget.

My organization sued, claiming the city had no right to exclude a majority of workers from offering their services to build the schools. The city relented and allowed competitive bids from non-union contractors, which saved taxpayers \$8.5 million.

In Quincy, the foxes are indeed watching the hen house. And just like on Wall Street, when that happens, it's going to cost taxpayers plenty.

Ronald N. Cogliano is president of the Merit Construction Alliance in Kingston, which represents open shop contractors and employees in Massachusetts.

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