

South Bend Tribune

OPINION *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Viewpoint: County ordinance would benefit local workers, taxpayers

Robert Kruszynski Jr. and Diana Hess South Bend Tribune

Oct. 16, 2016, 5:00 a.m. ET

Contrary to The Tribune headline, “Pro-labor, pro-local ordinance advances” (Sept. 29), the Responsible Bidder Ordinance that we introduced is not pro-union but rather a pro-St. Joseph County worker ordinance. After all, who do you want building your roads and bridges? Do you trust the lowest-skilled workers building your children’s schools or those with the most experience, skills, training and safety standards? Would you rather a local company with local workers be paid with your taxpayer dollars or one from several states away?

Supporting the RBO demonstrates to our taxpayers that county officials are committed to responsible spending of tax dollars. And the best use of those tax dollars is spending them locally whenever possible. Local contractors tend to employ local workers creating a stronger local tax base, lower unemployment and more dollars circulating through local businesses. Further, the training and apprenticeship requirements help promote high-paying skilled jobs in local economies while keeping work sites safe.

The purpose of an RBO is to ensure local governments hire only professional, competent contractors who will perform the highest quality work — efficiently, safely, on time and on budget. RBOs set clear, objective criteria that contractors must meet to be eligible to bid and work on public works construction projects.

State legislation declares that contracts must be awarded to the lowest “responsive and responsible bidder,” however there is no language defining just what that means. The Responsible Bidder Ordinance is local government’s way of clearly defining the

expectations of the local community, creating transparency for the bidder, the county and the taxpayer.

The proposed ordinance includes requirements that bidders are registered with the state and in good standing; are not in violation of any federal, state or local laws; have evidence of participation in U.S. Department of Labor approved training and apprenticeship programs; have a drug testing program in place; and have proof of professional trade licenses along with a statement on staffing capabilities.

Looking for a free mini puzzle? Play the USA TODAY Quick Cross now.

The St. Joseph County ordinance also places a priority on utilizing local businesses through bid credits for contractors based in St. Joseph County with a smaller credit given to contractors from neighboring Indiana counties and additionally providing incentives to purchase materials from St. Joseph County vendors. There is also a credit available if a contractor employs a local workforce, defined as 25 percent of their workforce living in St. Joseph County or neighboring Indiana counties. In a recent opinion column, St. Joseph County Chamber of Commerce President Jeff Rea said, “But at the same time, the reality remains that our government leaders have been elected to represent the interests of their specific district, not the region.” Yes, we were elected to represent St. Joseph County taxpayers and to make decisions based on what we believe best serves those constituents.

There is a common misconception that apprenticeship programs are only union affiliated. But any contractor can develop and obtain USDOL approval for an apprenticeship program providing it meets USDOL standards designed to train master craftsmen. In fact, the primary non-union construction industry group, the Associated Builders and Contractors, has many different USDOL approved apprenticeship programs around the country including locally through contractors such as Majority Builders. “Non-union” contractors will still be able to receive local government contracts under this ordinance. This requirement only ensures that contractors are of the highest quality as set by the standards of the U.S. Department of Labor.

The Chamber of Commerce should applaud companies investing their own resources to develop a highly trained and skilled workforce who are then qualified for higher skilled, higher paying jobs. Especially since 40 percent of St. Joseph County households earn wages at or below the United Way ALICE income threshold. ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, or the working poor.

Similar ordinances have been passed by Republican and Democratic mayors, commissioners and councils from around the state who realize that an RBO is a “good tool to protect our taxpayers’ investments” (Mayor Greg Goodnight, Kokomo). To date, 29 RBOs are in effect in Indiana, including in the cities of Indianapolis, Portage and Muncie along with LaPorte, Monroe and Vigo counties and a handful of school corporations.

Again, we believe that the Responsible Bidder Ordinance is good, practical, common-sense legislation that serves well the taxpayers, workers, business community and government of St. Joseph County.

Robert Kruszynski Jr. represents District A and Diana Hess represents District E on the St. Joseph County Council.