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Business View

## **PLA Bad Move for UMass**

**BY GREG BEEMAN**

In-state tuition and fees at the University of Massachusetts have more than doubled over the last decade. Yet the University of Massachusetts Building Authority has voted to spend an extra \$100 million needlessly by endorsing the use of a project labor agreement (PLA) for construction of UMass Boston's 10-year, \$750 million master plan.

PLAs require unions to be the "sole and exclusive" source of all jobsite labor. According to unionstats.com, 80 percent of state construction workers are not union members.

For decades, UMass has built successfully without PLAs. If you're wondering why the authority, which is appointed by the governor, would change course now, just look at the calendar. A gubernatorial election is scheduled for November.

Attempting to rally construction unions to his side, Gov. Patrick went to Plymouth in March to the Building Trades Conference. "I have directed that project labor agreements be used when necessary," he said. "As a start, we're going to use a PLA on the new \$150 million science facility ... at the UMass Boston campus." The science facility is part of the campus's master plan.

The governor went on to list the Salem State College library, a Lowell courthouse, a UMass Amherst academic building and restoration of the Longfellow Bridge connecting Boston and Cambridge as PLA candidates. Patrick also bragged that 80 percent of the construction work controlled by his administration is already being built by union labor.

A study conducted by Suffolk University's Beacon Hill Institute found that PLAs increase school construction expenses by at least 12 percent. The premium is attributable to reduced competition and onerous union work rules, not what workers earn. All public construction is subject to state and federal prevailing wage laws.

As a deep recession stretches into its third year, taxpayers are in no mood to pay that premium. A recent Suffolk University/7 News poll found that 69 percent of state residents oppose compelling contractors to hire all their workers through unions.

In southern California, two municipalities that supported President Obama in 2008 just voted to ban PLAs. In the words of a recent Wall Street Journal editorial, "From Boston's Big Dig to the San Francisco airport, if it's a project with egregious cost overruns, a project labor agreement is probably involved."

Politicians tell us that jobs are their top priority. Nowhere is the situation more dire than in the construction industry. Last year alone, Massachusetts lost 18 percent of its construction jobs, according to Associated General Contractors of America.

The UMass Building Authority's vote certainly carries favor with a powerful constituency. But with families across the commonwealth struggling to keep pace with tuition and fee hikes, it may prove to be precisely the kind of election-year politics that voters are fed up with.

***Greg Beeman is president of Associated Builders and Contractors of Massachusetts.***