



## State board compounds economic misery

By Donald Chaisson and Greg Beeman | Friday, November 6, 2009

The nation's economy finally began to grow in the third quarter of this year. But the hopeful national economic report makes it even harder to stomach news that the Massachusetts economy shrank yet again.

So did state revenues. As a result, Gov. **Deval Patrick** announced yet another round of emergency budget cuts and eliminated nearly 1,000 state jobs to plug a \$600 million gap.

No sector has been harder hit by the recession than the construction industry. State construction employment plummeted by 18 percent in the past year, compared to a 13 percent national drop.

Metropolitan Boston accounted for the biggest chunk of those losses. There are nearly 12,000 fewer construction jobs in the area than there were a year ago.

A bleak construction employment picture makes the actions of a new state board even more inexcusable. The Board of Examiners of Sheet Metal Workers recently voted to adopt regulations that would cause more layoffs and dramatically hike consumer costs.

Sheet metal is involved almost every time someone works on air conditioning equipment or a furnace, and it's a big part of the public construction projects funded with your tax dollars.

In sheet metal and other trades, companies routinely have one experienced employee, called a journeyman, work with each less-experienced apprentice. But the proposed regulations would require three journeyman sheet metal workers for each apprentice on commercial and large residential jobs.

Under prevailing wage laws that apply to public construction in Massachusetts, a journeyman sheet metal worker earns about \$61 per hour; an apprentice starts at around \$24. In this economy, companies will lay off apprentices, not hire more high-wage journeymen, to comply with the regulations.

Outlandish training requirements would raise costs even further. The board would require up to six years of training to achieve journeyman status, including 750 hours of classroom time - more than is required for far more complex trades like plumbing and electrical. To give you an idea of how absurd the proposed regulations are, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission requires just three years of training for licensure to operate a nuclear power plant.

The reason the Board of Examiners of Sheet Metal Workers would vote to adopt such absurd regulations is explained by the five gubernatorial appointees to the seven-member board. Ignoring requirements set out in the law that created the board, Patrick selected three union officials and two executives from union contractors.

The proposed regulations promote two goals. First, they would improve the competitive position of politically wired unions by imposing a bloated union cost structure on the 80 percent of the industry that isn't unionized. Second, they would protect senior union members by making it difficult for new journeypersons to be licensed.

The proposed regulations must still go through months of public comment and hearings. If sanity isn't restored before they are finalized, they will stand as a clear example of why Massachusetts continues to lag even as the national economy begins to recover.

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