

City agrees not to contract out Rec Center work in Portland

Laborers Local 483 just had a win in its more-than-decade-long struggle with the City of Portland over contracting out in the Bureau of Parks and Recreation. On Feb. 14, City officials signed an agreement committing to not contract out at Portland Parks and Recreation once the current staffing contract expires March 22, 2014.

The dispute's tortured history suggests that union tenacity sometimes pays off. Parks and Rec is one of several City bureaus where workers are represented by Local 483, but since at least the late 1990s, the City has hired some recreation center employees indirectly through a contractor. At Mt. Scott and Southwest community centers the contracted employees work alongside union-represented City employees and do the same work — but with lower wages and benefits, and no union. Contracted workers staff the front desk, teach pre-school and swimming classes, and serve as lifeguards, roller rink attendants, and personal trainers.

"People would assume they were City employees," says Local 483 spokesperson Megan Hise. Instead, they're employees of Brooks Staffing, which gets a 26 percent "mark-up" under its contract, after paying worker wages that average \$11.91 an hour.

In 2001, Local 483 tried to unionize the contracted workers, but the state board that oversees public employee union elections went back and forth,

first ruling that the workers could simply be added to the existing Portland Parks and Recreation bargaining unit, and then ruling that they weren't public employees at all, but employees of a private contractor.

Local 483 next tried to address contracting out through the Portland Parks and Rec labor-management committee. But the recommendations of an ad hoc "alternate staffing subcommittee" — to halt contracting out — weren't heeded.

So on July 30, 2011, Local 483 filed a grievance, alleging that the City was in violation of its union contract. A clause in the contract bars the City from

contracting out bargaining unit work — unless the City can demonstrate that doing so produces cost savings, and the savings can't come from lower wages and benefits.

Last year, the grievance went before an arbitrator, and a hearing on the merits of the case was scheduled for Feb. 25 and 26, 2013. Facing the possibility that it could owe two years' back pay at the overtime rate, the City settled the grievance voluntarily before the hearing. The settlement — signed by City HR director Anna Kanwit, Parks and Rec bureau chief Mike Abbaté, and deputy city attorney Matt Farley — includes a \$5,000

payment to Local 483 (for legal expenses, though the settlement doesn't say so specifically). Under the settlement, the City agrees not to contract out the work for three years once the Brooks contract expires.

It's not clear what will happen to the Brooks workers once the staffing contract ends. With the union sounding off frequently to City Council, Parks and Rec had already reduced the number of contracted employees supplied by Brooks from a peak of about 140 to about 45 currently, said Local 483 internal organizer Erica Askin. Askin said Local 483 wants to see the City hire

them directly.

"We want this to turn into opportunities for the workers for permanent jobs with benefits," Askin said.

Hise said the fear is that the Bureau will shift the jobs in-house, but make them temporary and seasonal. Local 483's fight against contracting out is part of a larger political and philosophical struggle over City employment practices in which the union has also campaigned against use of prison labor, and overuse of temps and seasonal workers. The union argues that a low-wage staffing model is bad for employees and undermines the quality of public services.

Oregon House passes bill to fund I-5 Bridge project

SALEM — The Oregon House of Representatives moved the I-5 Bridge Replacement Project one step closer to reality Feb. 25, passing HB 2800 authorizing \$450 million in bond funding for Oregon's share of the project.

The vote was 45-11, with four excused.

"After a decade of study and planning, the Legislature is finally forging ahead on this important jobs and economic development bill," said House Speaker Tina Kotek (D-Portland). "I'm proud of this bipartisan effort to pass a prudent, thoughtful, practical bill that will keep the project moving forward."

The amended version of HB 2800 includes a number of "buy America" requirements that will ensure goods manufactured in the United States are used to construct the bridge. Provisions to utilize apprenticeship training programs are also included.

Gov. John Kitzhaber, who was in Washington, D.C., with Washington Gov. Jay Inslee to meet with Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, commended the action. "By investing in a safe and effective transportation system for Oregon, we are providing a safer and less congested trip for freight and commuters. It is time that we build this

bridge," he said.

In recent conversations, LaHood and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano have reaffirmed the federal government's strong support for the project, Kitzhaber added.

Forty billion dollars worth of interstate and international commerce crosses the I-5 Bridge to nearby ports, businesses and distribution facilities, and commerce is increasingly impacted by congestion at a pinch point that is one of the worst spots anywhere between Mexico and Canada.

In addition to construction jobs, the economic impacts from replacing the

bridge and improving the interchanges will result in the creation of 4,200 jobs and \$231 million in additional wages in 2030, Kitzhaber said in a press release.

Oregon's portion of the funding for the next two years will come from existing funds in the Oregon Department of Transportation budget. Legislators placed a number of sideboards on the project so that bonds to finance the bridge construction will only be sold when a specific set of criteria are met. Those criteria include commitments from Washington State and the federal government to pay for their fair share of the project, and the completion of an investment grade analysis by the state treasurer.

Legislators from both parties discussed the prudent approach to funding the project and the importance of replacing the bridge to both create jobs in the short term and strengthen the economy in the long term.

"Investment, by all of us, in this machinery of commerce is essential if Oregon — all of Oregon — is to successfully compete on a national and international scale," said Rep. Cliff Bentz (R-Ontario), who served as House Co-chair of the Joint I-5 Bridge Replacement Committee, along with Rep. Tobias Read (D-Beaverton).

HB 2800 now moves to the Oregon Senate for a vote March 4.



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