

Building Justice

COMMISSIONER **JOE BERNEY** PUSHES THROUGH CRITERIA FOR CONSTRUCTION FIRMS TO BUILD COURTHOUSE

By Henry Houston

At a busy diner in Springfield, Commissioner Joe Berney excitedly tries to show *Eugene Weekly* a video of the Lane Board of County Commissioners passing a community benefits agreement — the first time the county government has taken such action, he says.

Watching a clip from a commissioners' meeting just isn't possible when there's a buzz of silverware clanging on plates and coffee cups thudding on tables, so Berney puts his phone back in his pocket.

Seen later, the video shows county commissioners unanimously supporting what Berney pushed for: a community benefits agreement.

"This is a series of historic commitments from Lane County that has never existed before," he says.

Kail Zuschlag, an assistant business manager with a local branch of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, agrees. He says the agreement will help those working in the construction industry, preventing them from having to make the choice between a doctor visit or buying groceries.

The community benefits agreement establishes five local impact goals that must be met in the construction of the courthouse — that is, if the construction project gets placed on the ballot in May and if voters approve funding it.

Berney says the agreement is a representation of everything he ran his campaign on: living wages, health insurance, renewable energy and decreasing greenhouse gases.

The agreement was what it took to get Berney to support placing a courthouse bond measure on the

ballot. The Board of Commissioners will officially decide later this month whether to ask voters to foot the bill for a new courthouse. If the measure passes in May, the board — thanks to Berney's politicking — will prioritize certain bidders who meet certain criteria.

The community benefits agreement has been touted as a way to stimulate the local economy and invest in the county's local workforce.

The language of the community benefits agreement promotes the use of local businesses, contractors and workers; ensures that jobs with the courthouse project pay a living wage and offer family health-care benefits; prioritizes diversity and equity in the workplace; incorporates sustainability in the project's design and construction; and uses state or federally approved training and apprenticeship programs.

The agreement offers a fair chance to local organized labor rather than letting out-of-state contractors win the courthouse project bid and bring in a non-local labor force.

It creates an even playing field for unions, Berney says.

"Unions want living wages [and] benefits, they want enough resources to feed their families and put a roof over their heads," he says. "That's a labor agenda, and that's what this does."

Bob Bussel, director at the UO's Labor Education and Research Center, agrees with Berney about the aim of the county's community benefits agreement.

"Unions tend to support these things because they support raising standards," Bussel says. "A lot that is in here are things that are really in the wheelhouse of unions in general and building trade unions in particular."

More local contractors buying from more local suppliers can lead to a greater stimulus to the local economy than if a community benefits agreement weren't included in a capital project, Bussel adds.

Zuschlag says unionized labor has been waiting a long time for something like this.

"Cut-rate contractors" that don't reinvest in their workforce have held down local contractors and local workers, he says. Although contractors are supposed to pay their workforce prevailing wages, a project's lowest bidder often cheats by misusing workers — for example, by having laborers do electrical work.

The community benefits agreement is an investment in supporting the local Lane County construction industry, Zuschlag says. It can help local — union and nonunion businesses — catch up with the rest of the state of Oregon in wages, health care and retirement.

"It is a choice by the community to support the working families," he says. "It stops the race to the bottom."

County Administrator Steve Mokrohisky said during the Feb. 5 meeting that the agreement should not result in higher costs to build the courthouse and will make sure the county can still keep the project within its budget.

"There's no extra cost in doing this," Berney tells *EW*. "Municipal construction projects require something called prevailing wage. Any higher costs, we're just looking at profit margins for general contractors."

Zuschlag adds that the cost of a project doesn't increase just because a contractor wants to take care of their workers and that "a really bad contractor might charge the same as a good one."

In the community benefits agreement's language, the county says officials will work with other jurisdictions that have developed similar programs. One jurisdiction named is the University of Oregon.

In November 2017, the UO and its general contractor, Hoffman Construction, with offices in Portland and Seattle, developed a project labor agreement for the construction of the Phil and Penny Knight Campus for Accelerating Scientific Impact. It's similar to a community benefits agreement, according to Kelly McIver, director of strategic engagement and communications at the university.

The agreement commits the general contractor to establish an apprenticeship program; recruit and retain women, minority and emerging small business subcontractors; and hire military veterans who are interested in entering the construction industry.

The UO and Hoffman meet monthly to ensure all aspects of the agreement are being followed, according to McIver.

Berney says he hopes he can serve on the oversight body for the community benefits agreement to ensure it's properly executed.

He adds that the county's community benefits agreement for the courthouse is just the beginning.

"I got the county administrator officer to say on the record to say that if this thing passes, the county will work with the Eugene school district to encourage them to have a similar community benefits agreement for the construction of \$300-plus million bond they already approved," Berney says.

If that's the case, Zuschlag welcomes it.

"The community benefits agreement and different associations doing it often will benefit us in the industry in the long term," he says. ■



HAPPENING PEOPLE

BY PAUL NEEVEL

Lou Moulder

"I took my first ballet class in Germany at age three," says Lou Moulder, whose father was serving in the Army. She also took classes in Alabama and Tennessee before her family settled in Dallas, Texas, when she was eight. "In high school, I taught young children at the Whistle Stop Dance Studio," she says, "but after high school, I worked at retail and office jobs. Later on, I began to teach yoga and ballet. I assumed that I wouldn't make a career in dance, but I figured out that teaching dance could work for me." In 2006, at age 30, Moulder flew to Eugene for a weekend visit. "As a little kid I wrote a paper," she recalls, "I thought I'd end up in Oregon." Six months later, she headed north with a full car, including her cat. Once in Eugene, she worked from home for a year as an administrator for an air conditioning company. She began teaching adult ballet and tap at Ballet Northwest Academy in 2008, and she graduated magna cum laude from the University of Oregon with a degree in dance in 2013. When the academy closed in 2016, Moulder brought her classes and a core group of students to the well-established Dance Factory studio. "Some of the students are very serious," she says. "Others are just there to have fun." Moulder also teaches dance and Pilates to small groups (five or less) and individual clients at Bodies by Pilates in the Tamarack Wellness Center. "For individual sessions, I usually work with people recovering from an injury or looking to improve their posture or balance," she says. "I put together a sequence of exercises, personally crafted for each client. I focus on getting people to move correctly."