

CONTRACTORS HOLD PEOPLE ARE MISLED

Isolation Hospital "Saving" Claimed to Be Loss.

PUBLIC WORKS PLAN HIT

City Construction Shown in Report to Be More Costly Than Jobs Let Out Under Bids.

PORTLAND, Dec. 20.—(To the Editor.)—Except where a real emergency precludes taking the time required by law for advertising for bids on public construction, a real emergency ever does, the usual custom is to justify such a course by a statement through the press as to the great saving made for the taxpayers. And, as there are no data at hand to check such statements, the intended impression is created in the public mind that the public officials—without equipment, without organization, without, often, practical knowledge as a builder—can and does erect public buildings cheaper than the man whose sole business it is to assemble materials and erect them into place in the least possible time and for the least possible money.

Just to show how far from the actual facts such statements may be, the case of the isolation hospital at Kelly Butte is cited. It was erected by the public works department of the city on force account.

In The Oregonian October 23 appeared the following: "Another recent accomplishment of the department of public works is the construction of the new municipal isolation hospital at Kelly Butte, at a saving which Commissioner Barbur places at \$20,000 under private contracting costs."

Committee Starts Inquiry. Of course it will be understood that this statement, appearing as it did just a few days before election, is entitled to some considerable discount, but the amount "saved" was so large as to excite suspicion as to its accuracy in the minds of the General Building Contractors' association and a committee of three careful, conservative and reliable men was appointed to go into the matter and make a report. The committee received the above clipping with a letter of instruction, which stated, among other things, "if this is true the association will want to know it. If it is not true the public will want to know it."

This report is now in our hands and available to any who are interested and care to examine the same.

It appears from this report that there were no bids taken at the outset, nor at any time, hence no contractors' estimates for comparison were available October 23 nor at any time; consequently no way of arriving at the amount of \$20,000, or any other amount, as a "saving." If \$20,000 was "saved," it had to be saved from something or it was not saved. Just to say that if contractors had done the job it would have cost \$20,000 more than it did cost the city, and thus show a "saving," is about in line with the way this kind of stuff is handled. For when the statement appeared the city itself did not know what the actual cost had been, for the committee was unable to get this data until November 15, later, from the records at the city hall.

Building Data Compared. The committee proceeded on the assumption that they had been asked by the city in good faith to bid on the job in competition with other contractors, and that in event they were awarded the work they would be obliged to erect it for the amount of their bid. The itemized bid submitted with their report is therefore complete as to items, on the supposition that they might be awarded the contract, in which event they would be able to turn the building over to the city complete as it now stands, with all bills paid and with the usual profit on work of this class.

The report shows the total bid to be \$47,744. The records at the city hall show that there has been charged against the isolation hospital construction account the total sum of \$52,500 to date. There is, therefore, a difference of \$4,756 in favor of the contractors of this showing, instead of \$20,000 in favor of the city. The committee can see no reason for increasing its estimate of \$47,744 and concludes that every dollar the city paid above this sum was needlessly spent and, therefore, instead of the transaction showing, as handled, a "saving" it carries an actual loss of not less than \$4,756.

Summary of Report. It appears from this report: First—At the time the statement was made, October 23, there were no bids or other data available from which to make any comparison to arrive at the \$20,000.

Second—The books at the city hall were not in shape October 23, nor for a considerable time thereafter, so that anyone could tell what the actual cost of the building was.

Third—The complete showing from the records, when they were closed, in comparison with an absolutely dependable estimate, does not give a "saving" of \$20,000, or any other sum, but that there was an appreciable loss in the sum of \$4,756.

The committee indicated that they were willing to go over each item in their "bid" with anyone interested. As the items of building of roadway, erection of telephone poles and water storage tank are not matters pertaining to the actual building itself, they were omitted from both sets of figures in this report.

In a later statement in the press it appears that "Portland's new contagion hospital has been completed at a total cost of \$57,636." Quite probably if the excepted items had been included in both totals in the report the relative difference would be still more in favor of doing public construction work by contract if the object in view is to really save the taxpayers money.

We repeat therefore what we have said before, that it is manifestly unfair to the builders of any city for its public officials to make or permit to be made in the press any statements of this kind unless they are prepared to back them up, and do back them up with the actual verified facts.

GENERAL BUILDING CONTRACTORS' ASSOCIATION. O. HUGHSON, Secretary.



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