

Union: Law requires prevailing state wage

By Andrew J. Beckner/Register-Herald Reporter

Construction workers who will one day build the new Beckley Higher Education Center should be paid the state prevailing wage, a union representative told county commissioners Tuesday.

Wayne Rebich with the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation told commissioners at their meeting that because the federal grant paying for the project is coming through the county, they have a responsibility to help ensure workers are paid fairly and in line with state law.

"Are they saying that skilled construction workers don't deserve a decent wage?" Rebich said. "Are they saying they don't deserve health care, that they don't deserve a pension plan?"

If that means a prevailing wage, apparently not.

Father Thomas Acker, executive director of The Educational Foundation, said the federal grant states very clearly that it doesn't fall under the Davis-Bacon Act. That federal law states that workers on most any project to which the United States is a part of the construction process must be paid no less than locally prevailing wages and fringe benefits.

Rebich doesn't disagree. He says that, no, the Education Center construction project -- companies are in the process of bidding on it now -- doesn't fall under Davis-Bacon.

But because the federal money is being funneled through a state entity -- in this case, the Raleigh County Commission -- that it does fall under state prevailing wage laws.

"It's the law as far as I'm concerned," Rebich said.

If that's the case, then county commissioners said he'd be happy with the outcome.

"As far as I'm concerned, our intent is to follow the law," commission president John Aliff said. "We will do that."

Now it's just a matter of what, specifically, the law is in this case. Both Acker and the county commission said it's a matter for attorneys to hammer out. But Rebich said he was hoping the case could stay out the courts. That's when the waters get muddy, he said.

"You have to respect the law and what it is," Acker said. "I don't know what the union will do, but we have to follow the law."

Land preparation for the three-story facility is complete. Officials hope to break ground on the project by April with a targeted opening date sometime next year.

The Beckley Higher Education Center is part of a multimillion-dollar project near Interstate 64 east of town. Once finished, it will serve as a regional campus for eight colleges and universities.

In other news from Tuesday's meeting, commissioners approved a matching-funds request of \$5,000 from the Upper Paint Creek Watershed Association.

That group is planning a 44-mile park and hiking trail along a route that stretches from Dry Hill Road to Hansford in Kanawha County.

Howard Hughes, one of the group's members, said he eventually would like to see informational kiosks set up at old coal camps along the trail. The vision is for it to become a tourist destination in southern West Virginia, he said.

The group is shooting for a \$100,000 grant from the federal government and needs matching funds from other sources to get it, Hughes said. So far, county commissions in Kanawha, Fayette and Raleigh have come through with a total of \$15,000.

"We appreciate what you've done so far," Raleigh Commissioner Pat Reed said.

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