

# Officials report high response to Workforce surveys

By Phil Kabler

More than 30 percent of state contractors have completed and returned WorkForce West Virginia surveys of wages paid to their construction workers, which will be used to calculate new state prevailing wage rates, WorkForce research director Jeff Green said Wednesday.

That's already a significantly higher response rate than the single-digit percentages that the state Division of Labor garnered in its surveys to calculate the state's prevailing wage rate previously. Green said that may show that WorkForce's easier, more streamlined survey form is encouraging more contractor cooperation.

"That's already more than three times what the Division of Labor got," he said of the more than 1,300 surveys submitted to WorkForce West Virginia.

Likewise, on Wednesday, Green and fellow WorkForce West Virginia researchers prepared to host the second of three scheduled "webinars" to assist contractors with questions about completing the survey – but none called in.

"Maybe that's a good sign," Green said.

Green said the initial webinar drew about a dozen participants, most with questions about reporting fringe benefits, which in the survey include payments for health insurance, pensions, vacation, and apprentice training.

One of the more common questions has been whether contractors are to count employees' share of contributions for health coverage and pension funds as fringe benefits, he said. (The answer, he added, is no.)

"We're fielding a lot of phone calls from contractors," he said.

The WorkForce West Virginia survey is modeled after a form used in Oregon to gather data for that state's prevailing wage rate, which Green said rated highly for its simplicity and ease of use.

The WorkForce survey has drawn criticism from legislative leadership since it was unveiled in early June.

At a heated Joint Committee on Government and Finance meeting on June 8, Republican leadership demanded that WorkForce instead rely on federal Bureau of Labor Statistics rates to set the prevailing wage rates for workers on major state-funded construction projects.

At the time, Green said it was unfeasible to rely just on BLS data, which includes wages for residential construction projects, which have lower pay scales than commercial and heavy construction projects. The federal data also includes wages for part-time employees.

That culminated with the Joint Committee rejecting a motion to extend the old prevailing wage rates through Sept. 30, when WorkForce is expected to set the new wage rates. That motion was rejected on

a partisan 3-7 vote, temporarily leaving the state without a prevailing wage rate.

The deadline for contractors to submit WorkForce surveys is Aug. 31, Green said.

Prevailing wage was one of the first issues taken up by the newly Republican-controlled Legislature in January. The bill (SB361) originally called for an outright repeal of prevailing wage, but through compromise, ultimately directed WorkForce to work with Business and Economics researchers at Marshall and West Virginia University to come up with a method to recalculate prevailing wage rates.

Mike Clowser, executive director of the Contractors' Association of West Virginia, was traveling Wednesday and could not be reached for comment.

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