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Supervisors approve policy asking contractors to hire local workers

*Desert Sun Wire Services
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The Riverside County Board of Supervisors today approved a policy directing all agencies to encourage contractors doing business with the county to employ local residents.

Under the Riverside County Works program, successful bidders on construction, housing and road projects will be asked to hire at least 60 percent of their workers from within the county.

Supervisors John Benoit and Marion Ashley cited the county's 15.1 percent unemployment rate as a factor in establishing the policy, which will be monitored by the Executive Office over the next year to determine its success.

The policy does not require local hires.

The proposal approved by the supervisors says the program "may enable local residents to return to full employment in the construction and development trades in the near future."

"It should be noted ... that the county does, in fact, make local bidder preferences available to providers of numerous goods and services as a means of helping create and retain jobs within the county," it said.

Last week, a number of union tradesmen complained to the board about difficulties getting hired by private contractors on various projects -- none of which, however, were believed to be county-financed.

The issue arose when Supervisor Jeff Stone proposed barring the county from entering into "project labor agreements," which are collective bargaining agreements in which contractors and subcontractors hire union-affiliated workers for construction jobs that guarantee pay and benefits above a certain threshold.

Stone described PLAs as anti-free enterprise and was backed up by a number of PLA opponents, who contend the compacts drive up costs and discriminate against non-union workers.

But union laborers asked the board to keep its options open, pointing out that the Inland Empire's construction industry has been among the hardest-hit sectors of the local economy since the start of the economic downturn.

Stone's proposal was voted down 4-1.

Benoit dedicated the Riverside County Works program in honor of his late chief of staff, Barry Nestande, who worked on it in the weeks preceding his sudden death Friday at age 49, possibly from a heart attack.

The two had worked together since 2002, when Benoit was first elected to the state Assembly.