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Scrap the police details

The Boston Globe

By David G. Tuerck
 June 20, 2008

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IN APRIL, Governor Deval Patrick signed legislation authorizing the secretary of transportation and public works to "promulgate regulations and recommend guidelines for the use of police details at public works sites." In doing so, he put the state on the cusp of ending the controversial practice of relying exclusively on uniformed police officers to direct traffic around work sites on public roadways.

Under the legislation, the secretary may recommend guidelines for hiring civilian flaggers to do this job, as commonly done throughout the rest of the country. In general, civilian flaggers cost less than police details and do the job just as well.

It would make sense for Massachusetts to take advantage of this cost saving. Despite claims to the contrary by the police unions, the practice of relying exclusively on uniformed police officers apparently does not make Massachusetts work sites any safer. The frequency with which workers on roadways are struck and killed by passing cars is no lower in Massachusetts than elsewhere.

To be sure, police union leaders are doing all they can to stop even a modest revision in the current practice. They convinced the Legislature to add language to the law that prohibits any change from interfering with local ordinances and collective bargaining agreements. And they are making the argument that the state would not save money, anyway, by opening up the job to civilian flaggers.

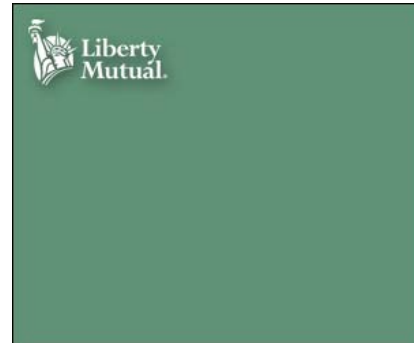
The reason, they say, is that the state would have to pay flaggers the "prevailing wage" on public works projects. The minimum pay for a Boston police officer working a detail is \$36.30 per hour. The state prevailing wage for flaggers is currently posted at \$37.45 per hour. Hence, no cost saving is possible - or so they argue.

Consider, though, what this means. Taking out fringe benefits, the posted prevailing wage for flaggers translates into an hourly wage of about \$30 or an annual salary of \$62,400. That's for a job that requires about eight hours of training. That's as much or more than we pay for workers, including nuclear technicians, school counselors, social workers, librarians, and firefighters, whose jobs require extensive schooling or training.

Would it really be necessary to pay so much for civilian flaggers were the state to use them rather than police details on public works projects? No.

The prevailing wage is determined by the state Labor Department from collective bargaining agreements between contractors and the unions. But, under current practices, there are few, if any, opportunities for private contractors to employ civilian flaggers. After all, the intent of the new law is to end the union monopoly that makes all such opportunities virtually nonexistent.

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What matters, therefore, isn't the currently posted prevailing wage. What matters is the wage that civilian flaggers would be paid if the state opened up the job of directing traffic to competitive bidding.

Were the state to take this step, private firms could be formed for the purpose of bidding for the work. As flaggers employed by such firms took over the job of staffing work sites, the agreements between flaggers and their employers would provide a new basis for determining the prevailing wage. The wage would likely be less, not more, than the wage currently paid to police officers, for the simple reason that the newly formed private firms would have an incentive to do the job for less. Competition would do what it always does, i.e. benefit the consumer by reducing price.

One suspects that police union leaders understand this logic all too well. Otherwise, why would they be resisting change so fiercely?

Maine has a prevailing wage law. In the Portland area, the prevailing wage for flaggers is \$14.76 per hour, including benefits. That - not some bloated wage extracted by a union monopoly from timid, local politicians - should be what Massachusetts taxpayers and rate payers have to pay. Governor Patrick already understands as much. How interesting it will be if he stays the course and thereby shows courage of a kind that his Republican predecessors were never able to summon when it came to the same issue.

David G. Tuerck is executive director of the Beacon Hill Institute and chairman and professor of economics at Suffolk University. ■

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