

# Opposing sides square off over merits of 'prevailing wage' law

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A proposal that could force non-union construction contractors to raise wages on certain government-funded projects is an intrusion that could lead to government control of wages in other industries, opponents said at a forum at the Inn at Pasatiempo in Santa Cruz this morning.

The Solidarity Committee of Santa Cruz County, backed by the Central Labor Council, is asking the county Board of Supervisors to require that a "prevailing wage" be paid to workers on redevelopment projects that include more than \$100,000 of public funding.

Redevelopment projects benefit the community at large, said Matt Farrell, a city of Santa Cruz worker and shop steward for Service Employees International. "Shouldn't some of the benefits go to the worker?"

Under the state standard for determining the prevailing wage "the union wage always ends up being the prevailing wage," said panelist Robert Freed, a labor attorney who opposes the action.

The union wage for carpenters

in Santa Cruz County is \$20.43 an hour, plus a benefit package that costs about \$6.50 an hour.

Panelist Tom Hopkins, owner of a Santa Cruz Construction Firm, said the "market-driven" wage for non-union construction workers is \$16 to \$22 an hour, plus a benefit package similar to the one unions pay.

"Don't be fooled by the current narrow proposal," Hopkins said. If an effort to control wages spreads to other industries, he said, "we will see some of the same (economic) stagnation we've seen in the Soviet Union" and other countries with a controlled economy.

Those pushing the prevailing-wage requirement insisted they do not intend to expand their effort. "That's not part of our agenda," Farrell said.

Freed said prevailing-wage ordinances have been enacted in a number of San Francisco Bay Area communities, and said there are efforts to expand the coverage to other industries in Los Angeles.

Former Santa Cruz Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt, who now works for the Solidarity Committee, said the effort is being made on con-

struction trades because so much public money is spent on the construction projects.

The proposed law "wouldn't financially impact private-sector projects" proposed for downtown Santa Cruz, Farrell said. He said the law could push construction costs up 5 percent to 10 percent.

The prevailing-wage law "is as good as passed," said panelist Ted Burke, owner of the Crow's Nest and Shadowbrook restaurants.

Wormhoudt denied that, saying supervisors have been contacted, but none has promised a vote. The issue is on the supervisors' agenda May 7.

In brief interviews after the forum, Hopkins and Wormhoudt agreed that some construction workers are being paid less than \$16 an hour, but there is no way of telling how many.

Some contractors pick up laborers for the day at the K mart parking lot on 41st Avenue, where as many as 40 men gather. On several occasions, the men, almost all of them Hispanic, have been questioned by Border Patrol agents about their residency status.