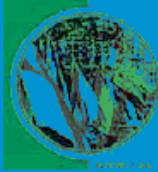


International
Week
at OU



SUNDAY
May 8, 2005

A Kentucky Derby stunner, page D-1

The Sunday Messenger



OU planes



Today:
Sunny
High 64/Low 40

Corners being cut in school construction?

By KIM GUFFEY
Messenger staff writer

In looking to save a few dollars, has the Ohio School Facilities Commission allowed shoddy construction at public schools to become the standard, rather than the exception? Some feel that is indeed the case.

"They're trying to save a buck by hiring the cheapest labor and it's not only causing facility problems, but costing the state more money in repairs," said Calvin Jefferson of BMA Media, who serves as spokesman for the Ohio Construction Coalition.

Created in 1997, the facilities commission "provides funding, management oversight and technical assistance to local schools for construction and renovation of school facilities," according to the commission's Web site.

With the inception of the commission, school districts no longer had to hire contractors who pay prevailing wage, Jefferson said. The commission also does not require the hired contractors and school district to adopt a "responsible contractor policy," Jefferson said.

A drug-free workplace, employee benefits, insurance stipulations and references may all be required by a school district as part of a responsible contracting code. Deciding code can be a way for a school district to use factors other than cheapest labor when choosing a contractor, Jefferson said.

A multi-craft labor management group, the Ohio Construction Coalition has randomly investigated 32 districts that have recently had construction projects through the facilities commission. According to Jefferson, construction problems were found in all 32 districts — problems Jefferson said could have been avoided if the school districts were able to hire better-quality workers.

"These were just random schools that were chosen. Give us another year and we'll find 32 more schools with the same problems — and 32 each year after that until something is changed," Jefferson said.

While State Rep. Jimmy Stewart, R-Athens, said he does not oppose the idea of the facilities commission, he said he does find there to be a serious problem with the construction of local schools.

"Throughout my district and throughout the state of Ohio, as new schools are built, many suffer from serious construction problems. I've seen roofs that leak and patches on top of patches," Stewart said.

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With the inception of the Ohio School Facilities Commission, school districts no longer had to hire contractors who pay prevailing wage.

Quality of school construction at issue

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Touting many schools throughout the 92nd District, Stewart said he has seen problems in the Meigs Southern, Fort Frye, Morgan County and Athens County schools.

"We've spent a lot of money on schools, but if it's not quality construction then it could be a multi-billion-dollar disaster," Stewart said.

According to Stewart, part of the problem could be that many contractors hire out-of-state sub-contractors for work on local schools. Without the local ties, the workers might not feel as person-

ally responsible to a project as they would if they lived near the school, Stewart said. Hiring local workers can be part of a responsible contracting agreement, Jefferson said.

In Athens County, Stewart said Alexander Local School District has experienced some problems with sub-standard construction on its facility that opened in 2004.

"We've had problems with the roof that had to do with the quality of work that was done," Alexander Supt. Bob Bray said.

Bray said he could not specifically blame problems with the leaking roof on issues of low

wages or out-of-state workers, but he did say that all problems resulted from a low standard of work by the contractors.

Stewart said he would like to see more investigation of the construction problems at the state level.

Jefferson said he turned Columbus News Channel 10 onto the problem two months ago. The station will air the findings of its own investigation on Monday at 6 p.m. The program is expected to feature three school districts in the Columbus area that have experienced problems with poor construction.

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