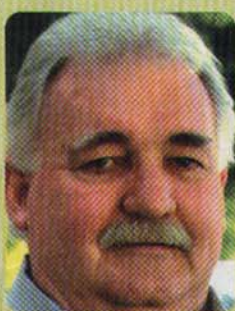




real estate: viewpoint

Construction unions play pivotal, responsible role



JAMES LOSCH

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Regardless of how you feel about unions in general, you should appreciate that responsible builders and unionized building trades play a vital and constructive role in our community. The training they provide and the quality they deliver affect our homes, jobs, travel, and virtually every work and leisure activity. Their affect is pervasive, multi-faceted and enduring — but often overlooked. Here’s why you should care:

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Responsible builders run in-house programs to train apprentices and upgrade journeymen skills. The building trades, moreover, operate a nationwide network of classes, schools and educational campuses. Inside the Carpenters’ Training Center in Pleasanton, for example, is a mock freeway overpass, erected so workers know how to read blueprints and can pitch right in when they reach the job site.

Union workers earn better wages and fringe benefits than itinerant carpenters living in pickups and bunked in cheap motels. Reducing workers’ pay below a level of fairness becomes both shortsighted and self-defeating. The old adage “you get what you pay for” is nowhere more true than as it applies to the construction industry work force.

High-quality buildings improve the morale, efficiency and productivity of the people who work in them. They help keep our industry competitive and our jobs from going offshore.

Over the 30-year life of a building, the cost of construction has been shown to be only about 3 percent of the total cost. Maintenance and utilities are another 4 percent. The remaining 93 percent of total cost is wages, salaries and other operational expenses for the people who work in the building.

Wages constitute only one component of project cost. Responsible builders provide superior estimating, bidding and scheduling, each an important contributor to cost. They are particularly helpful in preconstruction planning and cost-containment.

Excellent safety practices result in fewer accidents and impact insurance costs.

The benefits to the larger community from union membership are enormous. Rather than being a burden on public services, union families pay taxes to support these services. Individually and collectively they contribute to schools, charities, service organizations and community drives. Union workers receive health insurance and pensions.

San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown had it right when he said he would rather see a building union-built because when the job was over, the workers wouldn’t be asking for government handouts.

It may sound strange for management to be talking this way about labor, but we made our peace many years ago. That’s why we sit together in an organization called the Building Industry Trust. It’s a partnership between contractors and the Northern California Carpenters Union. We work together to promote the quality of our lives, jobs, homes and the places we work. We think that commitment benefits everyone by promoting dignity, pride, stable families and good jobs.

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