

Wage law means pay hike for highway workers

Written by Kristyn Halbig Ziehm
Wednesday, 07 April 2010 19:20

County poised to follow requirement giving crews prevailing hourly rates on jobs done for municipalities

Ozaukee County Highway Department workers could be paid more than their union salaries when they do work for townships and municipalities beginning this year.

The County Board on Wednesday was poised to allow the increased wage scale to conform with a state law requiring that it pay the prevailing wage to employees when they do work for other governmental units.

“We’re not happy about it. We think it’s a step backwards,” County Administrator Tom Meaux said. “The whole issue will have a significant impact on local government.

“Really, all it’s doing is driving up the cost to taxpayers.”

The impact won’t be on the county as much as it will be on the townships and municipalities, he said, because the county charges these governmental units the actual cost of the work, including labor and materials.

The increase in wages paid to meet the prevailing wage requirement will be passed on to these governmental units, Meaux said.

Townships will also find they have to do additional paperwork to comply with the prevailing wage requirement, said Mark Banton, the county’s construction superintendent and surveyor.

“I feel bad for the towns to have to take on this extra burden,” he said, noting many townships have small, part-time staffs. “It’s difficult now to make budgets work. This will just make it worse.”

Until this past year, he said, the prevailing wage requirement only applied to projects of \$234,000 or more.

Now, state law calls for the prevailing wage to be paid on projects that cost \$25,000 or more.

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That's most of the work the county does for other municipalities, Banton said, adding the county generally does at least one project each year for the townships.

The only projects not affected by the prevailing wage requirement is some maintenance work, such as chip sealing, cutting brush and ditching, he said.

In recent years, the county has been doing more and more work for other governmental bodies, Meaux said.

"We partner with local government a lot," he said, noting the county provides a quality product at what is often a lower price. The county is also more flexible and able to respond to local concerns better than private contractors, he said.

Although the county will pass on the added cost of wages to the townships, it will also find an increased amount of paperwork is needed to track the time employees spend on various jobs, officials said.

That's because most county employees handle several different jobs on site, and different wage rates will apply depending on the job.

For example, the 40 county highway department workers affected by the law are paid anywhere from \$29.02 to \$38.80 an hour, depending on such things as their tenure, where they fall on the wage scale and insurance selection, Finance Director Andy Lamb said.

"In every case other than the kid who holds the signs and the person who drives the truck, the prevailing wage is higher than the county's wage," he said.

The prevailing wage for employees doing some of the most common jobs — grading, operating a backhoe or concrete grinder — is \$46.65, Lamb said.

The prevailing wage for those operating an oiler, crusher or screener is \$47.77 an hour, he said, and for general laborers is \$34.79 an hour.

Truck drivers operating single or double-axle vehicles must be paid a prevailing wage of \$35.49 an hour, while those operating larger vehicles with three or more axles must be paid at least \$24.35 an hour, Lamb said.

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The prevailing wage is reviewed and updated by the state once or twice a year, he added.

Workers will have to log how much time they spend on each duty so they are paid the prevailing wage for each job, Lamb said.

Even as the county complies with the law, it will continue to work with legislators to seek an exemption for intergovernmental work, Meaux said.

“All it’s doing is costing government and the taxpayers more,” he said.
