

Education bill has good intentions, burdensome results

John Topp
April 26, 2006

Wisconsin lawmakers recently approved the contractor education bill that requires a person applying for a building permit to complete at least 12 hours of approved continuing education courses during the previous two years and attend at least one professional meeting or educational seminar during that two-year period. Consumer protection is at the root of this law: The goal is to eliminate those less-than-professional builders from our industry.

We support this goal, but we question more government intervention.

For the legitimate contractor, who already participates in far more than these minimum requirements, the bill does little more than add another burdensome layer of paperwork to prove compliance to some outside source. In addition, we have now expanded the cost of government by creating a construction police force to process what will promise to be mountains of paperwork.

Many of us in the building contractor industry are left scratching our heads in frustration, as Building Advantage member companies already have numerous self-administered mandates in place to ensure customer protection because we know it is good business practice. Our associations and labor organizations provide multiple opportunities for contractor personnel to continue education. Good construction practices are inherent to our apprentice training as well as the ongoing continuing education of all involved in our industry. In short, we require more education than this bill proposes and have concerns about the amount of work it will create yet the strong possibility it will undershoot its mark. It's questionable whether 12 hours of continuing education every 24 months and one professional development class is enough to truly ensure a contractor is staying current with new codes and technologies. Quality is something contractors must strive toward daily – and not because it's mandated.

Choices to be made

We already have this necessary infrastructure in place to remain competitive. As businesspeople, improving the bottom line is our incentive. We know that if we are not performing at peak efficiency, we will fail. The market -- our customers -- will decide who survives. It is our job to win these customers by exceptional performance so our reputations will prevail.

If unscrupulous contractors are functioning in our marketplace, it is up to us to ensure that customers are made aware of how we do business in our organizations. As an industry, it is critical that we continue seeking improvement. We can increase market share through good, sound business practices. Legitimate business is a balance of value to the customer and reward to the contractor for a job well done.

We have a choice in this matter. We can self regulate to the highest standard and then in turn aggressively market ourselves as an industry to drive all purchasers to our contractors where we know the job will be done right or be content to be government regulated even more thanks to some bad apples. We should choose the former and eliminate the future possibility of more unwanted regulation.

John Topp is the executive director of the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin Inc. and the Building Advantage initiative.