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Pittsburgh's City Council passes prevailing wage legislation

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By Rich Lord, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh City Council unanimously passed expanded prevailing wage legislation yesterday, but the 9-0 vote came with ample evidence of deep divisions among the city's lawmakers as a vote for council president looms.

Approved was a bill saying that when \$100,000 or more of city aid goes to a large-scale development, any hotel, grocery store, office maintenance and cafeteria workers in the development must earn a prevailing wage, reflecting the average paid to similar workers in the city.

Councilman William Peduto introduced amendments that exclude independent restaurants from the rules, better define grocery stores and mixed-use developments, ease reporting rules, and add a \$30,000 fine for violations, among other minor changes. Those changes were approved.

After hours of discussion, an explosion of shouting sprang from a raft of amendments that never came up for a vote. Councilman Patrick Dowd's proposed changes, introduced last week, had no support beyond their author, and Council President Doug Shields successfully maneuvered to prevent their consideration.

Mr. Shields also sought to stop Mr. Dowd from further discussing the bill, which had already been the subject of several lengthy and contentious meetings. Finally, Mr. Shields called on the city clerk to conduct a roll call vote on the bill.

"He is refusing to protect a single voice who in fact supports this bill," Mr. Dowd shouted. "Unbelievable, undemocratic! ... I am silenced."

"At last," said Mr. Shields, as prevailing wage supporters in the chamber cheered.

Throughout hours of council meetings thereafter, members repeatedly brought up the quarrel. Mr. Dowd then raised the vote for council president set for Jan. 4. A majority of council members are considered either first- or second-tier contestants for the post, which will come up for a vote after incoming members Natalia Rudiak and Robert Daniel Lavelle are sworn in.

"I, for one, would never support somebody [for president] who denies a single member the opportunity to even speak to a bill," said Mr. Dowd.

"Thank you," said Councilman William Peduto. "At least you got to the point of what all of this is about."

"Mr. Dowd had an ulterior motive" in pushing his amendments, said outgoing Councilman Jim Motznik. "It was to try to cast council members as non-presidential. ... It was all planned out to be a game, and it was disingenuous. And it is not something we should do with peoples' lives."

The prevailing wage bill is the first of a series of bills that a coalition called Pittsburgh United is backing for council approval. Developers complained that requiring their tenants to pay prevailing wages would drive development away from the city.

The legislation now goes to Mayor Luke Ravenstahl, who can sign, veto or allow it to become law without his signature.

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