

SB 493 will create a fair and equitable system for determining prevailing wages in Oregon. The current system is flawed, because it does not collect enough data to accurately determine wages in our state. Under the current system, a construction worker can earn more money (doing the same work) by traveling a few miles to the next county. Why is this construction worker worth more money when he or she travels to the next county? Some of the folks who are arguing against this legislation are saying that construction workers in rural counties do not deserve the same wages as construction workers in Multnomah County. They refer to the cost of living in different areas, etc. Various costs of living (housing, food, etc.) vary throughout the state, but the overall cost is not that much different when you consider that people in rural counties must travel farther to get the same services as those who live in or near bigger cities.

Approximately 41% of the current construction workforce will retire by 2031, according to the National Center for Construction Education and Research. Construction work is very rewarding, but it is also difficult in many ways. The construction industry is cyclical, the work is physically demanding and can be dangerous. Good wages and benefits help attract and retain construction workers. For those of you who think construction workers on prevailing wage jobs might end up making too much money, I challenge you to spend even one day in the pouring down rain or the hot sun, wearing a toolbelt that weighs 30 or 40 pounds, lifting heavy materials and using an outhouse when nature calls. The value of what we do is equal to any other occupation.

Responsible contractors who work on prevailing wage projects have quality apprenticeship programs. Apprentices earn a percentage of what journey-level workers make. They start at around 50 or 60 percent and the percentage increases with time and experience. So not all workers earn the top wage on prevailing wage projects.

For those who argue that this legislation will increase the cost of affordable housing, I would like to point out that if workers earn a living wage they do not need affordable housing. It's hypocritical to expect the people who build affordable housing to earn less than the market rate for their skills. The way to solve the problem of not enough affordable housing is to reduce the need for it.

We all pay the market rate for building materials throughout our state. It's time we get used to paying the market rate for labor throughout the state. It's the right thing to do.