

Union members, small business owners discuss right-to-work laws at commission meeting

Written by By Rick Abasta For the Sun
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The McKinley County Board of Commissioners held a heated debate on right-to-work laws between union leaders and county representatives, leading to packed attendance at their regular meeting April 17.

The discussion was triggered by an ordinance claiming to promote economic development by regulating employee payments to unions in McKinley County, in what's known as a right-to-work law.

Right-to-work laws ban unionized workplaces from requiring all employees to pay union dues as a condition of employment.

The ordinance states its intention as “to provide that no employee covered by the National Labor Relations Act need join or pay dues to a union, or refrain from joining a union, as a condition of employment; and provide certain penalties for violation of those employment rights.”

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The county stood on the side of the ordinance, seeing it as a benefit to employees and business owners.

Union members disagreed with the ordinance and with right-to-work laws being debated at the state level.

Don Manning, political campaign director for the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, stood before the commissioners and shared a PowerPoint presentation on the right-to-work initiative in New Mexico.

Chairwoman Genevieve set the floor rules before proceeding with discussions.

“Statements will be three to five minutes. Please, if you have stated your opinions before, we ask that you refrain from restating them today in the interest of time,” Jackson said. “There is to be no applause, no high-fives.”

Manning said the right-to-work initiative would hurt McKinley County.

“This is not good for the county,” he said. “This is not good for anyone. The right-to-work ordinances may be many things, but patriotic is not one of them.”

Manning said the right-to-work initiative undermines union jobs and in turn lowers wages.

“It won’t boost the economy because if you have jobs that are not as good, you will have no health care, lower wages and no pensions,” he said, citing the benefits of union membership.

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Manning's presentation showed GDP growth from 2012-16 with little or no difference, which he said was conclusive proof that right-to-work does not stimulate economic growth or lower unemployment.

Patrick Kimball-Lynch spoke out against the ordinance and said he has been a union member for 40 years. He is a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen.

"We are the coldest and continuous labor organization in America," Lynch said. "We're the oldest in New Mexico, oldest in McKinley County and oldest in Gallup."

He said the legacy of union workers in the county is one of economic prosperity, including those living outside of town in neighboring communities.

"If you leave the city limits, any household that you go by on the reservation or rural areas, there's some person they are related (to) or someone living in that household that is a union member," he said. "On behalf of all of these workers, I ask that you vote against this."

An opposing public comment supported the ordinance, citing its benefits to small business owners.

Brian Law, born and raised in Gallup, said there are 28 states that currently have right-to-work laws.

"Arizona became right-to-work in 1947. At that time, Albuquerque and Phoenix were about the same in size," Law said. "Since then they've grown. New Mexico should be bigger, but it hasn't grown much."

He said small business owners lose a lot of control over businesses they created when unions take over.

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“Small business is what made America great,” Law told the commissioners. “I would like New Mexico to become a right-to-work state and I think it would help the economy tremendously as it has done for other states.”

The ordinance will be decided at the next county commission meeting on May 1.

By Rick Abasta

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