
Haskins

When Fair Competition Isn't... Fair or Competition

By Jeremy Haskins

As an initiative that mandates the consideration of price only is being pushed on more municipalities in the guise of "fair competition" the question arises: Would you make any major purchase in your personal or professional life with price as the only consideration? If not, then how could a mandate that requires just that kind of decision-making possibly be in the best interest of your community?

Do you want the house, car, office or equipment that has lowest initial cost as its primary design criterion?

Fair is relative, but in this case, fair just means a level playing field. Allow qualified, informed professionals (a.k.a. professional engineers) to evaluate all of the strengths and weaknesses of various materials on the merits of those materials. Certainly that is only fair to ratepayers.

Why would an industry advocate price-only legislation?

True competition requires that all comers be judged based on all of the relevant benefits they provide to a buyer. The benefits that can be realized over the life of a project in a given location with the consideration constraints that are unique to that project are only appropriately evaluated by experienced managers.

Many civil engineers chose this specific field of study because it has the greatest impact on society. Likely the broadest discipline in engineering, civil engineering covers structural, environmental, transportation, geotechnical, and water resources. You would be hard pressed to go about your daily life without being directly impacted by civil engineering.

The training and experience of civil engineers is extensive and varying. Different experiences with different products shape professional judgment and preferences. Disagreeing with the decision of a licensed professional engineer is one thing. Disregarding their professional judgment is another. Politicians and lawyers are not qualified to make these decisions any more than most engineers are qualified to provide legal advice. Either approach is absurd. But only one of them represents an immediate hazard to the general public in addition to wasted tax dollars.

I wonder what modern society might look like if politicians and lawyers made engineering decisions. My guess is there would be no Empire State Building, Transcontinental Railroad, International Space Station, Panama Canal, Golden Gate Bridge, Channel Tunnel, Millau Viaduct, Big Dig or Large Hadron Collider or water reclamation projects such as the Hoover Dam, now going on 80 years old. The civil engineers designing those projects were not forced to use cheaper, limited life products in lieu of proven, structural materials. If they did, those iconic engineering projects would have already surpassed their useful life.

"It is unwise to pay too much, but it is worse to pay too little. There is hardly anything that some men cannot make a little worse and sell a little cheaper, and the people who consider price only are this man's prey."

— 19th Century British Commentator John Ruskin

Of course, I believe that vitrified clay pipe (VCP) offers the best long-term value, and we are happy to compete on the merits of the material. VCP has a demonstrated service life in the United States of more than 200 years, 400 to 500 years in Europe and thousands of years in the Middle East.

The truth is that without a mandate, all materials are allowed to compete on a fair and level playing field. Civil engineers make design choices and consider a multitude of options prior to a project entering the bidding phase. Communities are best served when engineers and financial managers work together to ensure the community's long-term interests. So be wary of organizations suggesting overly simplistic "solutions" where no problem exists.

The greatest return on investment favors materials that do not change over time, that deliver the greatest service life, the most options for maintenance and operations and the lowest risk to the owner and community, in both the present and the future. The advantages of using a premium, long-life product (vitrified clay pipe for sewers or brick and mortar for buildings) accrue to the owner. The advantages of using cheaper materials, which may be more forgiving at the time of acceptance, accrue to the contractor.

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