By Melissa B. Taboada, American-Statesman Staff

Austin district approves prevailing wages for bond work

About 100 labor advocates stand behind Education Austin President Ken Zarifis, who was advocating for the Austin school board to adopt federal prevailing wages.

About 100 construction workers and labor advocates packed the Austin school district’s board room and applauded and cheered after trustees on Monday night narrowly approved paying federal prevailing wages for work on $490 million in voter-approved bond projects and future construction.

However trustees also agreed to conduct a study by February to find the living wage to pay unskilled workers, possibly adopting a hybrid wage scale in the future with higher pay for the lowest earners.

In a 5-4 vote, trustees Tamala Barksdale, Gina Hinojosa, Jayme Mathias, Ann Teich and Amber Elenz voted for the federal prevailing wages. In another split vote, board President Vincent Torres and Trustee Robert Schneider voted against the study to determine a living wage floor.
“I want what we have to be inclusive and ensure some confidence for all the workers, regardless of their skill level,” said Trustee Lori Moya, who voted against adopting the federal prevailing wages. “That the district is going to stand up for them and make sure they are paid a fair wage.”

The labor advocates in recent weeks have repeatedly called for the federal prevailing wages established under the Davis-Bacon Act, which apply to contractors and subcontractors working on public buildings or projects. Joining the effort were the Painters and Allied Trades, Workers Defense Project, the Laborers International Union local and Education Austin, the district’s largest employee union.

“Affordability is a huge issue here,” said Jeremy Hendricks, business manager for the Laborers’ International Union of North America. “We have a lot of people who can’t afford to live in Austin, but they build our schools.”

The Austin school district currently pays laborers wage rates based on a 2005 district study. Work to be performed this summer on a handful of the small projects will be paid based on the 9-year-old district wage study that calls some workers to be paid $10 an hour less than the federally determined prevailing wage for the Austin area.

However, for other trades, the 2005 district wages are actually higher than the federal prevailing wages, which were updated for 2014 for Travis County. Because of the inconsistencies in wages between the federal and district rates, some laborers told trustees they would prefer for the district to conduct a new study and set its own rates. Trustees Moya and Cheryl Bradley also said they could not support the federal wage rates because unskilled workers will be paid less than minimum wage and they wanted to pay them a living wage.

Patrick Flynn, president and CEO of Flynn construction, asked the board to consider tabling the vote and moving forward with a district wage study.

“The issue with Davis-Bacon rates is that they are unbalanced,” Flynn said. “I support paying these gentlemen what they deserve as union contractors, but there are trades that are not being paid sufficiently under Davis-Bacon.”

Work on $349 million in projects, the majority of the 2013 bond, will go toward repairs and renovations, such as plumbing work or replacing air conditioning. Such work is scheduled for every campus in the district. The federal wages can be applied immediately to work on projects that soon will have the green light to begin.

The city of Austin, Travis County and Austin Community College previously adopted the federal wage rates.

The district does not anticipate exceeding any project budgets, because estimates for bond construction already include contingencies for inflation and rising costs.

Kayvon Sabourian, an attorney with the Equal Justice Center, a member of Austin Interfaith, which advocated for the federal wage rates, said since other local government agencies already use the Davis-
Bacon wage rates, the adoption of the federal wage rates provide a more uniform standard for how construction workers are paid locally on government projects.

“It’s more critical at this point in Austin history, because we have such an active and growing construction industry, to make sure the government agencies are getting their money’s worth when they spend money on construction,” he said.