

Project Silicon Silver proceeds at a gallop

Friday, January 29, 2021 by Seth Smalley

On Tuesday the Travis County Commissioners Court held a discussion on “Project Silicon Silver,” widely speculated to be the alias for chipmaking giant Samsung’s development contract. The discussion centered around acceptance of the preliminary application, along with a corresponding \$150,000 fee paid out to the county by the developer. The commissioners were careful to note acceptance was not tantamount to approval of the development, simply an indication of interest in continued negotiations.



The county is considering providing financial benefits in exchange for Samsung’s adherence to worker protection, wage, compensation, OSHA requirements and more.

Commissioner Brigid Shea highlighted the need for compliance enforcement, given the multitude of stipulations outlined in the deal.

“It’s my understanding that in the city’s economic development policy, there is no mention how or whether the city will monitor compliance with the worker protection requirements. So if we’re adding worker protection and wage requirements, but there’s no mechanism in city policy to measure compliance, how are we determining if the entity is compliant?” Shea said.

However, one of the county’s chief bargaining conditions – a living wage of \$15 per hour – could be made redundant via a current bill proposing a federal minimum wage at the same level, which seems likely to pass given the Democratic-controlled Senate.

Following a brief discussion of the compliance issue, and the prospect of on-site monitoring, Diana Ramirez, the director of Economic Development and Strategic Investments, said, “The feeling I’m getting from court members is that the [Chapter 380](#) section of the city policy is insufficient with regards to contract compliance with living wage, prevailing wage, OSHA 30 and on-site monitoring.”

Several citizen callers also stressed the need for county stipulations, including a living wage indexed to cost of living, local employee minimums and health insurance benefits for employees.

Fr. Paul Skeith from SoCo Episcopal Community and CTI spoke at the Travis County Commissioners Court this week to advocate that any private company receiving public tax subsidies from the county pay living wages, benefits, a career track, and strategy to hire locally (Fr. Paul quoted in Austin Monitor article below). The Court subsequently adopted these and other worker safety measures as part of a package advocated by CTI congregations and member institutions including Workers Defense Project, LIUNA, and Central Texas Building Trades.

Jessica Wolff with Workers Defense Project highlighted the strengths of the development standards, citing the local hiring requirement, construction training requirement and anti-retaliation provisions, and called for the standards set in this policy to become the county norm.

"We recognize this is a great first step and there's still more work to be done," Wolff said.

A third caller, Bob Batlin, came down on the opposite side, calling for minimizing the specificity of the county's requirements in regard to the deal.

"I suggest we limit guidance to general statements of values. Partial list of examples of guidance might be: The county might expect maximum local hiring, work safety is a focal point, hiring practices that are inclusive to all, pay and benefits that reflect the financial realities of the community, meaningful career path opportunities, documentation of established norms such as better builder priorities should be provided to the applicant," Batlin said, pointing to the 50 percent local-hiring requirement for the Tesla factory as an example of what not to do.

The general sentiment among the commissioners was that further specificity about worker protections and compliance enforcement logistics would be necessary before inking a final deal. But ultimately, approval of the Project Silicon Silver application unanimously passed.

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