

# BUILDING A STRONG KANE COUNTY

## How Prevailing Wage Works



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## BUILDING A STRONG KANE COUNTY: HOW PREVAILING WAGE WORKS

### ILEPI Economic Commentary #20

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#### INTRODUCTION

Members of the Kane County Board have expressed interest challenging prevailing wage determinations that are ascertained by the Illinois Department of Labor. One board member even claimed that prevailing wage “drives the costs up 15 percent, and sometimes a lot more than that” (*Daily Herald*, 2015). Results from this ILEPI Economic Commentary should give Kane County residents reason to be skeptical of these assertions. This analysis finds:

- Labor costs account for just 22.6 percent of total costs on heavy and civil engineering projects in Illinois, so it is mathematically impossible to save 15 percent or more by eliminating prevailing wage;
- Payroll costs on workers in heavy and civil engineering construction in Kane County reflect the wages paid in the regional labor market and the higher cost of living in the Chicago area;
- Median housing costs are 38.5 percent of the typical income for a laborer earning the prevailing wage in Kane County;
- Public works construction projects require skilled workers who complete more classroom and on-the-job training than the minimum requirements to receive a typical bachelor’s degree;
- In Illinois, heavy and civil engineering construction workers are more productive than the average construction worker, producing \$164,012 in value added to the economy per worker;
- Prevailing wage is *not* a union wage, but unionized contractors submitted 100 percent of bids on public projects in Kane County in the twelve months from April 2014 through March 2015; and
- In Kane County, prevailing wages generate \$46.1 million in economic output and support \$1.9 million in state and local tax revenues that otherwise would not occur.

Prevailing wage is necessary to prevent government bodies from undercutting the established labor market, and drives economic development in the county. Prevailing wage is the best deal for Kane County taxpayers.

#### LABOR COSTS AS A SHARE OF TOTAL COSTS IN KANE COUNTY

The most recent data from the U.S. Economic Census reveals that labor costs account for just 22.6 percent of total construction costs in heavy and civil engineering in Illinois (Figure 1). Heavy and civil engineering construction is used throughout this study because it includes work on highways, road, bridges, dams, water and sewer lines, and land subdivision— projects which are predominately financed by the public. Payroll costs plus fringe benefits comprised \$2.02 billion (22.6 percent) of the \$8.9 billion in total construction costs on heavy and civil engineering across the state in 2012. Meanwhile, administrative costs were 6.9 percent of total construction costs in the sector. Spending on materials, components, supplies, subcontracts, and energy costs accounted for the bulk of expenses (59.0 percent).

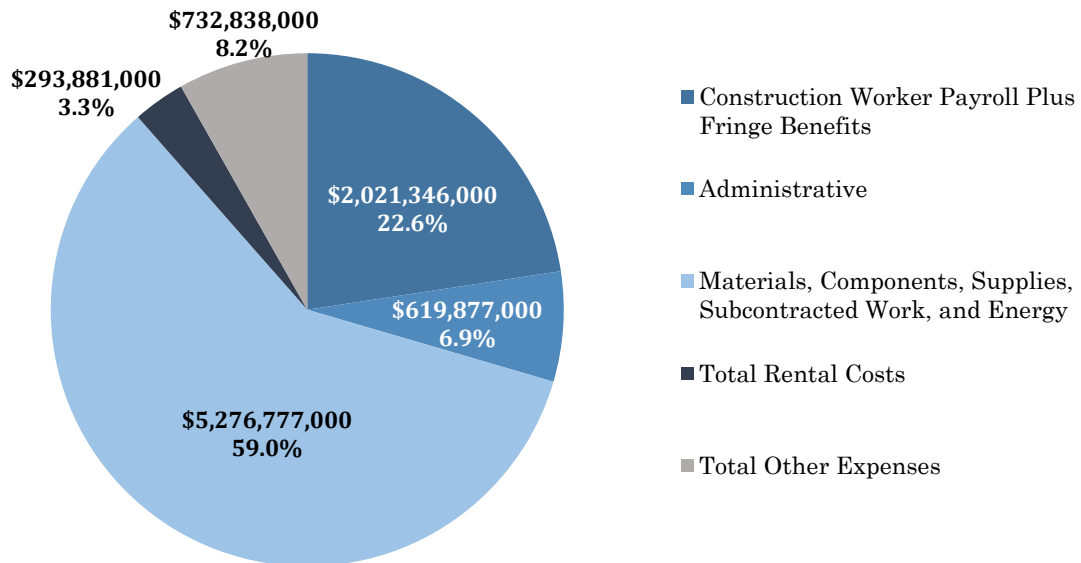
As the argument goes, prevailing wage raises the cost of public works construction. However, as will be evident, wages do not equal higher costs, but exploring the myth is worthwhile at the onset. If there were a 10 percent reduction in wages in Kane County, there would be just a 2.3 percent savings in total costs. Put another way, the county would save \$22,600 on a \$1 million project or \$226,000 on a \$10 million project. However, savings would occur *only if there is no relationship between wages paid and work performed*. Of course, this is an implausible assumption: higher wages attract more-experienced and better-skilled career employees who are more productive, which offsets most if not all of the cost savings.

It is also mathematically impossible for prevailing wages to increase total construction costs by 15 percent or more. Prevailing wage only impacts the labor cost portion of total expenditures, which only accounts for

22.6 percent of the cost of public projects. In order to “save” 15 percent, construction worker wages would have to be reduced by 66.4 percent.<sup>1</sup> This means that workers would see their middle-class incomes fall to a level close to the state’s minimum wage, *and* it assumes that skilled workers would stay in Kane County’s construction industry, still show up to work, and be just as happy, hardworking, and productive.

*Figure 1: Labor Costs as a Share of Total Public Works Construction Costs, Illinois, 2012 Economic Census*

### Total Heavy and Civil Engineering Construction Costs in Illinois, 2012 Economic Census



Source: 2012 Economic Census, United States Census Bureau available at <http://www.census.gov/econ/census/>.

### COUNTY AND INDUSTRY COMPARISONS OF PAYROLL COSTS

The Illinois Prevailing Wage Act establishes local standards in Kane County’s labor market. The law is intended to prevent a government body, such as the Kane County Board, from using its expansive purchasing power to undercut privately-established wages and benefits in a community. In effect, the law takes labor costs out of the equation for contractors in winning a bid on a public construction project. Instead of lowering costs by using low-skill, low-wage workers, the law forces firms to compete on the basis of productivity, quality, materials costs, technology, management practices and logistics, and profit margins— while paying local market wages.

Efforts to repeal, weaken, or otherwise renounce prevailing wage determinations are motivated by the claim that the rates are “inflated” or “too high.” Even though the Illinois Department of Labor is already required to determine prevailing wages based on actual certified transcripts of payroll forms from *both* employers and employees in the county, those who advocate against prevailing wage question the process. In doing so, they imply that cutting worker wages would somehow help to increase prosperity in Illinois.

Take the prevailing wages for laborers as an example. In June 2015, the prevailing wage for a laborer was \$38.00 per hour in base wage and \$23.90 per year in hourly health and pension benefits in Kane County. At first glance, these rates may seem high, but most construction is seasonal work. Road construction workers, for instance, only have jobs for eight or nine months out of the year and can only log around 1,600 hours of work each year. With 1,600 hours of prevailing wage work, a laborer in Kane County would earn \$99,840 in total compensation, including \$60,800 in wages, \$38,240 in fringe benefits, and \$800 in training benefits (Figure 2).

<sup>1</sup> Basic algebra: 22.6% share of total cost multiplied by -66.4% labor cost = -15% total cost.

Figure 2: June 2014 Prevailing Wage Rates of Laborer, Kane County

Kane County Prevailing Wage	Hourly Rate	1,600 Annual Hours	Percent of Income
Base Wage	\$38.00	\$60,800	60.90%
Fringe Benefits	\$23.90	\$38,240	38.30%
Training	\$0.50	\$800	0.80%
Total Compensation	\$62.40	\$99,840	100.00%

Source: "Kane County Prevailing Wage for June 2015" from the Illinois Department of Labor, available at <https://www.illinois.gov/idol/Laws-Rules/CONMED/rates/2015/june/KANE9999.htm>.

Figure 3 displays data on the regional labor market from the U.S. Census Bureau on *payroll costs*— which include all forms of compensation, such as salaries, wages, bonuses, vacation allowances, sick-leave pay, and contributions to qualified pension plans. In 2013, the average payroll cost per employee was \$68,130 for construction workers in Kane County. Labor costs in heavy and civil engineering construction, on the other hand, were \$107,696 per employee in the county (which aligns with the total compensation in Figure 2). The difference between heavy and civil engineering construction costs and total construction labor costs is *not* the result of the Illinois Prevailing Wage Act. First, the average firm size was much smaller for the overall construction industry (5.64 employees per firm) in Kane compared to those working in heavy and civil engineering (12.78 employees per firm). Many construction businesses are independent contractors who only perform work on-the-side. Conversely, heavy and civil engineering contractors have more employees because they work on the county’s largest projects. Larger businesses are also more likely to provide health and retirement benefits to their employees (BLS, 2014).

Second, heavy and civil engineering payroll costs per employee in Kane County reflect wages paid in the local labor market. Kane payroll costs are less than the comparable figures in Cook County (\$109,148 per employee) and the Wisconsin average (\$107,847 per employee). They are also similar to the estimates for the Counties of DuPage, McHenry, and Will (which range from \$91,420 to \$103,321 per employee). This is what construction workers on public projects earn in the regional economy— mostly because they are highly skilled and face significant workplace safety risks compared to other industries. Public works construction employees earn more because it is what the market dictates, not because prevailing wages inflate the wage rate (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Comparison of Payroll Costs to Neighboring Counties and States, 2013 County Business Patterns

2013 County	Entire Construction Industry			Heavy and Civil Engineering Construction		
	Employees	Payroll Per Employee	Firm Size	Employees	Payroll Per Employee	Firm Size
Kane, IL	7,877	\$68,130	5.64	984	\$107,696	12.78
Cook, IL	64,243	\$74,720	6.63	4,984	\$109,148	15.48
DuPage, IL	22,181	\$72,428	7.90	2,289	\$103,321	19.40
Lake, IL	8,843	\$66,936	4.86	503	\$104,028	6.71
McHenry, IL	5,402	\$69,869	5.38	1,175*	\$102,671*	25.54*
Will, IL	11,659	\$69,549	6.38	2,126	\$91,420	22.38
All Illinois	178,055	\$66,906	6.34	20,477	\$96,115	15.03
All Wisconsin	93,208	\$64,709	6.96	14,303	\$107,847	21.03
All Indiana	116,325	\$53,711	8.95	15,584	\$72,039	19.83

Source: 2013 County Business Patterns, United States Census Bureau, available at <http://censtats.census.gov/cgi-bin/cbpnaic/cbpsect.pl>. \*2013 data for the Heavy and Civil Engineering Construction sector were unavailable for McHenry County. Data were available, however, for the county in the 2012 County Business Patterns. Thus, McHenry County’s estimates are from 2012.

Labor costs are similar in nearby regions outside of Chicagoland (Figure 4). The Illinois average for per-employee payroll costs was \$96,115 in heavy and civil engineering. The reason labor costs are greater in Kane County (\$107,696 per employee) compared to the state is that the cost of living is higher up north. While living expenses are 3.1 percent cheaper than the national average in the Champaign area and 14.2

percent cheaper than the national average in Springfield, the cost of living is 16.9 percent more expensive than the national average in the Chicago area, which includes Kane County (Figure 4). Furthermore, comparable payroll costs per employee were actually higher in border-state Wisconsin (\$107,847) but lower in nearby Indiana (\$72,039). However, a lower cost of living is once again the primary reason why labor costs are lower in Indiana. This is evidence that prevailing wages are not artificial or inflated.

Figure 4: Comparison of Cost of Living, 2010 Cost of Living Index for Selected Urban Areas (Composite)

Metropolitan Economy	Cost of Living Compared to National Average
Chicago area, IL	+16.9%
Champaign area, IL	-3.1%
Springfield area, IL	-14.2%
Milwaukee-Waukesha area, WI	+1.9%
South Bend area, IN	-8.1%

Source: 2010 Cost of Living Index– Selected Urban Areas, Annual Average: 2010 (100% composite index used), United States Census Bureau. available at <https://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0728.pdf>.

Housing costs are an example of high living expenses in Kane County (Figure 5). In the past year, the median price of homes that were sold in Kane County was \$194,400 (Zillow). Data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that median monthly homeowner costs in Kane County were \$1,952 per month in 2013. The median monthly costs (“selected monthly owner costs”) include payments for mortgages, real estate taxes, insurance, and utilities and fuels. Compared with the income from wages that a typical laborer earns from Figure 2, the median cost to own a home would exhaust 38.5 percent of a worker’s take-home income. It is worth noting that most government agencies consider housing affordable only if costs are below 30 percent of household income. Therefore, prevailing wage does not even support purchasing a home in Kane County without a second job or without having a spouse or roommate who also works.

Figure 5: Comparison of Payroll Costs to Industries in Kane County, 2013 County Business Patterns

2012 Kane County Industry	Monthly	Annual
Laborer Income from Wages (Figure 3)	\$5,067	\$60,800
Median Monthly Homeowner Costs	\$1,952	\$23,424
Homeowner Costs as Share of Income from Wages	38.52%	38.52%

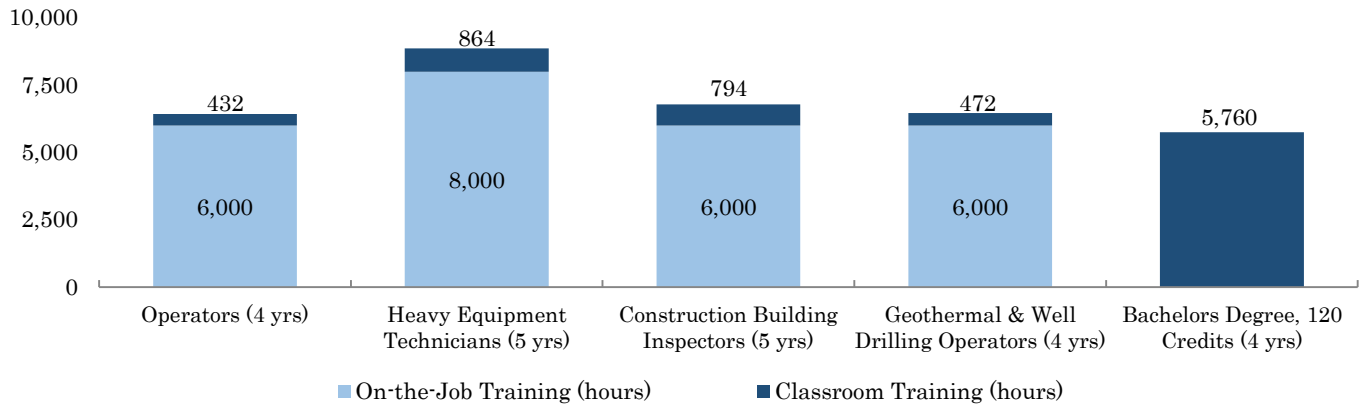
Source: Selected Monthly Owner Costs from “Selected Housing Characteristics” from the 2013 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates, available at <http://factfinder2.census.gov>; “Kane County Prevailing Wage for June 2015” from the Illinois Department of Labor, available at <https://www.illinois.gov/idol/Laws-Rules/CONMED/rates/2015/june/KANE9999.htm>.

## WORKER PRODUCTIVITY AND VALUE ADDED TO THE ECONOMY

Public works construction is not low-skilled work. Building high-quality infrastructure that is safe and durable for the public requires an experienced, educated workforce. Accordingly, many workers in heavy and civil engineering construction go through rigorous registered apprenticeship programs. These programs provide thousands of hours of classroom and on-the-job training to boost workers’ skills. The apprenticeship programs sponsored jointly by the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 150 and signatory contractors, for example, require at least 6,432 total hours of training over at least four years, including a minimum of 6,000 hours of on-the-job training (Figure 6). Heavy equipment technicians complete an even longer program: apprentices must log 8,000 hours of on-the-job training and 864 hours in the classroom over five years. By contrast, it is worth noting that the typical 120-credit hour bachelor’s degree requires just 5,760 hours of classroom training over four years and generally does not require any development of hard skills through on-the-job training.

Figure 6: Public Works Construction Skills Requirement Compared to Typical Bachelor's Degree

### Hours Required by Heavy and Civil Engineering Construction Apprenticeship Programs, Compared to Bachelor's Degree

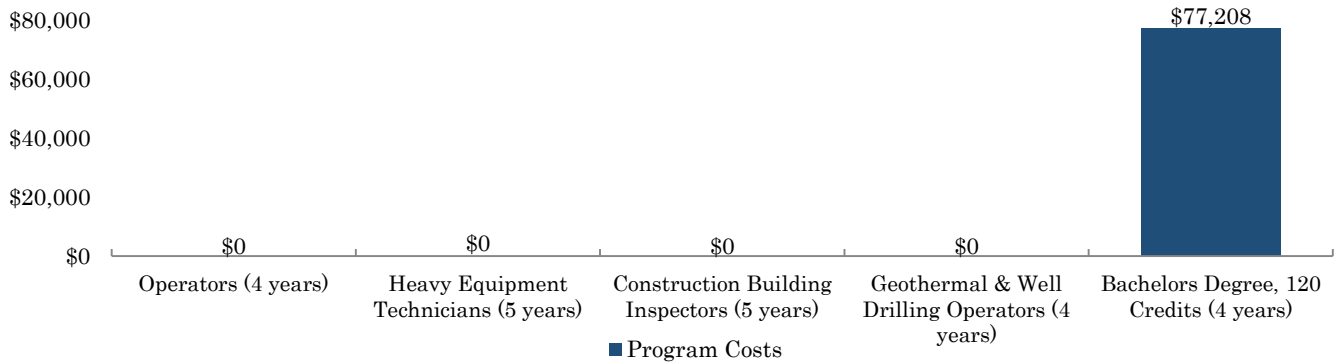


Source: International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 150, which has membership in Kane County. Requirements generously provided by Martin Turek, M.S., Assistant Coordinator-Safety Administrator. Typical bachelor's degree assumes 120 credit-hours required to graduate, such as in the University of Illinois College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS): <http://www.las.illinois.edu/students/requirements/minimum>. The hours estimate assumes classroom time of three hours per class per week, five classes per semester, 16 weeks per semester, and two semesters each year over four years.

Additionally, apprenticeship programs are operationally funded by contractors and supported by prevailing wages (Figure 7). The total out-of-pocket program cost for apprentices is \$0. Expenses are covered by employers through a cents-per-hour contribution to apprenticeship programs. By contrast, the cost of attendance at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (excluding room and board) totals \$77,208 over the next four years for new enrollees (Figure 7). Prevailing wages, therefore, support “the largest privately financed system of higher education in the country” (Philips, 2014).

Figure 7: Public Works Construction Training Program Costs Compared to Typical Bachelor's Degree

### Heavy and Civil Engineering Construction Apprenticeship Program Cost to Individual, Compared to Bachelors Degree

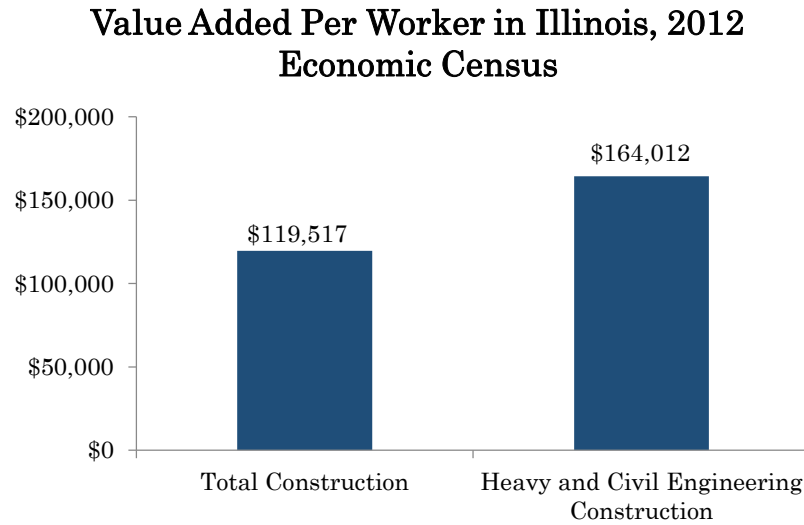


Source: Typical bachelor's degree program costs from the University of Illinois College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) for enrollees in Summer 2014, Fall 2014, and Spring 2015: [http://www.osfa.illinois.edu/cost/undergrad/res\\_1415.html](http://www.osfa.illinois.edu/cost/undergrad/res_1415.html). Costs include tuition, fees, books and supplies, and other expenses but not room and board

Finally, public works construction workers are extremely productive in Illinois. Figure 8 provides state-level data on the value added to the economy by workers in the entire construction industry and in the heavy and civil engineering sectors. “Value added”— which measures worker productivity over one year— is the total amount of business revenues generated minus the costs for materials, components, supplies, fuels, and subcontracted work. While value added in the entire Illinois construction industry was \$119,517 per worker in 2012, workers in heavy and civil engineering construction each contributed \$164,012 to Illinois’ GDP on average (37.2 percent more). Together, the high-skill requirement and elevated productivity levels

are the main reasons why wages are higher for public works construction employees compared to other blue-collar construction workers (Figure 8). It is worth noting, however, that the \$164,012 contribution to the economy per worker exceeds the \$107,696 payroll cost per worker from Figure 2.

*Figure 8: Worker Productivity, Entire Industry vs. Public Works Construction, 2012 Economic Census*



*Source: 2012 Economic Census, United States Census Bureau available at <http://www.census.gov/econ/census/>.*

### ADDRESSING THE UNION WAGE MYTH

The prevailing wage is a living wage determined by private actors in the local labor market. Arriving at a prevailing wage is the result of the majority of contractors and employees entering into private contracts. The rate is determined based on certified payrolls submitted by employers and workers. While employees are sometimes represented by a labor union, the prevailing wage is *not* necessarily a union wage.

A union wage only prevails if the majority of workers in a particular job classification are paid that rate. Still, in Kane County, nonunion contractors are not even bidding on public projects— let alone employing individuals to work on them (Figure 9). In the twelve months from April 2014 through March 2015, there were 32 lettings on public projects that involved work performed by operating engineers. These projects were awarded by the county, by townships and cities in the county, by the state, and by school boards. The total value of the projects was \$88.4 million over the year.

*Figure 9: Market Share of Public Projects Using Operating Engineers in Kane County, Union vs. Nonunion Contractors*

Contractors	Number of Bids	Project Wins	Total Project Costs
Union	90	32	\$88,357,617
Nonunion	0	0	\$0
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

*Source: Author's analysis of internal data generously provided by the Indiana, Illinois, Iowa Foundation for Fair Contracting (III FFC), which covers Kane County. The III FFC dataset is limited to only projects that employ operating engineers.*

On these 32 projects, nonunion contractors submitted 0 total bids (0.0 percent) compared to 90 bids made by unionized firms (100.0 percent). As a result, nonunion contractors did not win any projects in Kane County over the past year. Simply put, with a market share of 100 percent, it makes sense if a union wage prevails in Kane County (Figure 9).



**THE BENEFITS OF PREVAILING WAGE TO KANE COUNTY**

An overwhelming majority of research on prevailing wages has concluded that a state prevailing wage law has no statistical impact on the overall cost of public construction projects (Philips et al., 1995; Prus, 1996; Wial, 1999; Bilginsoy & Philips, 2000; Philips, 2001; Azari-Rad et al., 2002; Duncan, 2011; Duncan & Lantsberg, 2015). By paying a living wage, prevailing wage encourages skilled workers to enter the construction industry, increases worker training and productivity, and reduces workplace injuries and illnesses. These effects lead to workers who complete jobs on-budget and on-time, offsetting any increases in labor costs (Philips, 2014).

Prevailing wage builds local middle-class jobs. Studies show prevailing wage laws encourage the use of local, in-state contractors. Out-of-state contractors are 5 percent less likely to win bids on public construction projects due to prevailing wage laws, and repeal of prevailing wage leads to 6 percent of a project’s total value leaking out of the county economy (Prus, 1999; Working Partnerships USA, 2011). The preponderance of research also finds that state prevailing wage laws— requiring market rates be paid— increase worker incomes by up to 10 percent but increase productivity by 14 to 33 percent (Kessler & Katz, 2001; Kelsay et al., 2004; Philips, 2014). Any higher costs associated with requiring that market rates be paid is offset by increased productivity and better infrastructure quality.

Prevailing wage drives economic development. The economy benefits substantially from well-paid, highly-skilled, and healthy construction workers who complete jobs right the first time. Higher worker wages lifts consumer demand and increases spending at local businesses such as grocery stores, restaurants and bars, and professional and management services offices. As a result, prevailing wage stimulates job creation and generates \$1.1 billion in economic output in Illinois (Dickson Quesada et al., 2013).

Prevailing wage is the best deal for taxpayers. Prevailing wage laws promote worker training, which reduces errors and minimizes the chances of footing taxpayers with another bill to reconstruct low-quality infrastructure that does not last. Additionally, by fostering a strong middle class and enhancing economic development, prevailing wage generates millions of dollars in state and local tax revenues through increased consumer spending and reduced reliance on government assistance (Manzo & Carroll, 2014). In fact, prevailing wage supports \$44.4 million in state and local tax revenues each year in Illinois (Dickson Quesada et al., 2013).

Figure 10 presents an economic impact analysis of prevailing wage on Kane County using IMPLAN, an economic modeling software. The model incorporates assumptions and inputs used in the recent Illinois study on the economic and social impact of the state’s prevailing wage law (Dickson Quesada et al., 2013). The economic impact analysis finds that prevailing wages stimulate the local economy through increased consumer spending. In fact, prevailing wages generate \$46.1 million in economic output in Kane County annually and also support \$2.4 million in state and local tax revenues each year in the county. In summary, the prevailing wage for public construction projects delivers positive economic outcomes for Kane County (Figure 10).

*Figure 10: Economic Impact of Prevailing Wage on Employment, Earnings, Economic Output, and Tax Revenues in Kane County, 2013*

Economic Impact Analysis of Prevailing Wage on Kane County, IL, 2013		
Region	Economic Output (GDP)	State and Local Tax Revenues
<i>Kane County</i>	<i>\$46.1 million</i>	<i>\$1.9 million</i>
Chicagoland Area	\$658.4 million	\$27.3 million
Illinois	\$1,072.9 million	\$44.4 million

*Source: Author’s analysis of prevailing wage using inputs and assumptions from A Weakened State: The Economic and Social Impacts of Repeal of the Prevailing Wage Law in Illinois by Dickson Quesada et al. (2013). The analyses used IMPLAN Version 3.0.17.2, Minnesota IMPLAN Group, Inc. © 2011.*



## CONCLUSION

The Kane County Board should not act to weaken or renounce the prevailing wage rates ascertained by the Illinois Department of Labor. Prevailing wage determinations are based on certified payroll records from contractors and employees. They reflect the levels of compensation privately agreed upon by contractors and employees in the local labor market, which in turn are the result of the high skill level and high productivity of Kane County's construction workforce. Prevailing wage is necessary to prevent government bodies from undercutting the market. Prevailing wage is the best deal for Kane County taxpayers.

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