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EDITORIAL: UNION-BACKED BILL WOULD TIE COUNTIES' HANDS ON CONTRACT WORKERS

California has 58 county governments, each with its own payroll — and some of those payrolls are huge. Los Angeles County, for example, employs more than 100,000 people, which comes to about one county worker for every 100 residents.

Counties generally do a lot of contracting as well, usually for expertise or skill needed just for time-limited projects. Boards of supervisors ought to make decisions to hire or contract out based on what will best serve their constituents, but public employee unions and their rivals in the contracting sector try to influence those decisions by offering (or withholding) campaign contributions. Their relative power varies from county to county, but the unions generally have the more organized political clout. Ultimately it falls to voters to decide whether their elected supervisors are budgeting, hiring and contracting responsibly and to reelect them, or oust them, as the circumstances warrant. It's not a perfect system, but for the most part, it works.

Now public labor unions are trying to get a bigger slice of the pie by prevailing on their friends in Sacramento to carry legislation that would severely limit the power of counties to contract out for services. AB 1250, sponsored by the Service Employees International Union and authored by Assemblyman Reginald Jones-Sawyer (D-Los Angeles), easily passed in the Assembly in June and will come before the Senate when the Legislature reconvenes later this month. The bill, which ostensibly seeks to block counties from shifting work to contractors unless doing so really saves money, would effectively compel supervisors to pad county payrolls and would limit their options to contract with experts in particular fields.

It doesn't always make sense for county work to be done in-house. For example, L.A. County employs physicians, mental health experts and social workers to alleviate homelessness, but to be effective they must be supported by thousands of contract agencies that offer workers with expertise in housing and other services. The same is true of other human services, such as those for offenders newly released from jail, not to mention environmental, maintenance and data services.

SEIU and other public employee unions pushed similar bills in recent years to gain an unfair advantage over contractors at the University of California and the state courts. Those bills made it to Gov. Jerry Brown's desk but fortunately were vetoed.

Instead of sending this one on to the governor, the Senate should note that there is even less of a contracting problem to solve in counties than there was at UC or in the courts, both of which are statewide systems in which the public has only marginal or indirect oversight. Each county, by contrast, is managed by a board of supervisors that answers directly to local voters. The payroll-contracting ratio is a function of local needs, as it should be. Sacramento lawmakers should not impose a one-size-fits all rule that strips local supervisors — and voters — of their power to make their own staffing decisions.