

Antiabortion Effort Targets Unbuilt Clinic

A construction boycott is employed against a Planned Parenthood facility. The tactic is criticized by some as economic blackmail.

December 14, 2003 | Lianne Hart | Times Staff Writer

AUSTIN, Texas — Two months ago, construction crews were busy laying the groundwork for a \$6.2-million Planned Parenthood clinic on the city's south side. But the site is deserted now -- gravel blows in the wind, a padlock clangs against a chain-link fence.

Work halted last month after local subcontractors were persuaded by anti-abortion activists led by a building supply executive to steer clear of the project or face the loss of future work. As pressure and controversy over the project grew, subcontractors stayed away and the general contractor -- one of the largest in the state -- pulled out.

The construction boycott is a new twist in the abortion protest movement, and one its backers say they hope to see used elsewhere.

Abortion rights activists decry it as economic blackmail.

"They pressured and intimidated mom-and-pop businesses that are not political, people who are just trying to make a living," said Glenda Parks, chief executive of Planned Parenthood of the Texas Capital Region. "Anti-choice hard-liners are in a frenzy of elation right now, but the boycott does not in any way signify what this community thinks about this clinic. There is enormous support for this project to go forward, and it will."

Austin, a college town known for its liberal politics and laid-back lifestyle, is a seemingly unlikely location for an antiabortion uprising. "People in Austin are tolerant," said state Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, whose district includes the area where the clinic is to be built. "They are for affordable health care. We are not going to let a small group of radicals change that."

Leading the boycott of the construction project is Chris Danze, 48, an executive at a concrete supply business and organizer of the Texas Contractors and Suppliers for Life Assn.

Contractors on the Planned Parenthood project "were given two messages," Danze said. "The first is that it's wrong to build an abortion chamber. The second is that it's bad for

future business.... We're compiling a list. If you work on that project, you won't be working on other projects."

When ground was broken Sept. 23, Danze -- an owner of Austin-based concrete supplier Maldonado and Danze -- had already sent letters to several dozen local vendors. "Maldonado and Danze Inc., will remove from our list of approved suppliers, those suppliers who choose to participate in this new facility," he wrote.

Some business owners who received Danze's letter offered to send similar messages to their own associates, he said. Like a chain letter, word of the boycott spread.

About 750 central Texas subcontractors received letters asking that they turn away business from Planned Parenthood. Christian radio stations picked up the story and encouraged listeners to ask companies working on the project to quit. Contractor names and phone numbers were provided by Danze in widely circulated e-mails.

"The thing that's different about the impact of this is how quickly these calls for action spread via e-mail and the Internet" said Parks of Planned Parenthood. "The calls that came in to the contractors were from all over the United States. We don't know how many were from Austin."

When local churches joined the boycott, business owners had a decision to make, said David Bereit, executive director of the Texas-based Coalition for Life. "There are 600 churches and three abortion clinics in the Austin phone book. The demand for church-building projects is greater than for abortion clinics. Builders have to look at the long-term potential of losing this business," he said.

By November, general contractor Browning Construction Co. of San Antonio had lost its carpenters, heating and air-conditioning subcontractors, concrete suppliers and electricians.

"We have requested that the construction contract be terminated because we are unable to secure and retain adequate subcontractors and suppliers to complete the project in a timely manner due to events beyond our control," said Browning in a written statement.

Parks would not comment on legal action against Browning except to say, "We're working on closing out the contract."

When construction resumes, Planned Parenthood will serve as the general contractor, she said. Businesses hired for the project will be fully aware of the controversy that may follow. "They'll be prepared to withstand the pressure," Parks said.

Some of the subcontractors that backed out in November were overwhelmed with phone calls, she said. One got 1,200 calls on his business line. Another got several hundred at home. "They were inundated. I don't think they knew what to do."