

Abortion Clinics Targeted Before They Are Built

By [Karin Brulliard](#) November 30, 2003

When Chris Danze, a construction contractor and longtime antiabortion activist, learned Planned Parenthood was going to build a clinic here that would offer abortions, he knew his mission was to stop it. And he had a plan.

Just before workers broke ground for the clinic in late September, Danze sent 750 letters to contractors in the Austin area asking them to boycott the job and tell others to do the same. By early November, Danze and other abortion opponents had flooded local construction firms with so many phone calls, e-mails and letters that the general contractor overseeing the clinic's construction pulled out.

Construction on the clinic is at a standstill. Planned Parenthood officials insist construction will soon resume and will finish on schedule by next fall.

In the decades-old struggle over abortion, the boycott organized by Danze apparently represents something new -- the first time antiabortion forces have successfully used the threat of economic sanctions to stop the construction of an abortion clinic, at least for now. It marks a tactical escalation that could add a powerful new weapon to their arsenal.

That the boycott was staged successfully in Austin -- a liberal enclave whose politics are more akin to those in Berkeley, Calif., than those in the Bible Belt -- suggests the tactic could be copied elsewhere, antiabortion activists say.

"I want to learn exactly what he did . . . and try to export that around the country," said Jim Sedlak, executive director of Stopp International, a Stafford organization devoted to closing Planned Parenthood clinics.

Sedlak said antiabortion groups affiliated with Stopp International have used traditional methods -- picketing and zeroing in on building permit violations -- to close clinics in South Carolina and Texas and halt construction of one in California. Previously, activists who have pressured contractors to back out have met minimal success, he said. In 1995, an antiabortion group's influence on contractors delayed, but did not halt, work on a Planned Parenthood clinic in Lincoln, Neb. Danze said he was stunned his plan packed such a punch but said he has no doubt why. A "supernatural influence" helped, he said, but the primary force was a more earthly one -- the threat of financial consequences. He told contractors he would report which of them had complied with the boycott -- and which had not -- to local churches, which are big business for central Texas contractors.

"My strategy was first, it's wrong to build an abortion chamber, and two, it's bad for future business," he said.

Planned Parenthood and its backers -- including three former mayors of Austin, a state representative and a City Council member -- have denounced Danze's method as a form of economic blackmail.

"These are despicable tactics that any reasonable American finds repellent," said Gloria Feldt, president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, in Washington. "It's taking their ideology and strong-arming everybody else into adhering to that ideology."

Danze, 48, is a Roman Catholic who said he has taken unwed pregnant women into his home to keep them from abortion clinics. He said he sees "defending innocent life" as a calling, and pulling strings with contractors as part of that calling.

He began by mailing letters asking businesses to join forces with a group Danze called Texas Contractors and Suppliers for Life. Word of the campaign reached antiabortion groups and Christian radio stations across the country. They urged supporters to exhort contractors to shun the Planned Parenthood project.

By Nov. 4, so many plumbers, concrete suppliers and other workers had sworn off the project that Browning Construction, the San Antonio-based general contractor, said it had no choice but to back out, too.

"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," James Browning, the company's president, said in a statement.

Rusty Lineberry, one of the subcontractors working under Browning, said his drywall business received at least five calls a day from abortion opponents. Some callers were cordial, others weren't, he said.

"They said it was like the equivalent of the stone masons and plumbers in Germany building the gas chambers," said Lineberry, who stuck with the project until Browning pulled out.

Joe Miller, a utilities subcontractor, stayed on the job as long as Browning did. Nevertheless, he said the "hundreds" of phone calls from antiabortion activists left him "just praying that Browning would back out." He said he will not work on an abortion clinic again, partly because he does not believe in abortion, but mostly because he does not want to be on a construction blacklist.

Austin has three licensed abortion providers. The \$3 million Planned Parenthood facility would be the organization's fourth clinic in Austin, but the only one providing abortions. Like other Planned Parenthood clinics, it would also offer family planning services, treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, women's health care and HIV testing, said Glenda Parks, chief executive of Planned Parenthood of the Texas Capital Region.

Planned Parenthood officials say they will combat Danze's tactics by launching their own grass-roots movement. They will send an e-mail this week to 80,000 abortion rights advocates across the country, asking them to donate money to the Austin clinic -- in Danze's name.

"We've got to let him know that, for every out-of-control and anti-choice fanatic like him, there are thousands of us," says a copy of the draft e-mail.

Parks said Planned Parenthood is now acting as its own contractor, and workers have not been hard to find. When Browning backed out, she said, calls poured into her office from supporters and contractors willing to work on the clinic -- some for free.

"There's no way that you can say Austin doesn't support this project," Parks said.

Danze said he is also gearing up for the day construction on the clinic resumes. He has galvanized dozens of volunteers to write letters and e-mails, make phone calls and design fliers and bumper stickers in support of the boycott, he said.

"We're not giving up on this," Danze said. "There are three too many abortion chambers in Austin. We don't need another one."