

Lucas County approves historic Sweatshop-Free policy, paves way for Governor to follow suit

Proactive policy will help ensure taxpayer dollars are not spent on sweatshop labor

On Tuesday Lucas County Commissioners unanimously approved a resolution that prohibits use of taxpayer dollars to purchase goods for the county that were made in sweatshop conditions. The policy is aimed at using taxpayers' dollars ethically to level the playing field for Ohio workers and improve working conditions worldwide, and is supported by local religious, labor, and community organizations.

The move adds Lucas County to a list of 10 other Ohio cities and counties with sweatfree policies. Organizers are calling on Governor Strickland to follow suit and implement such a policy for the entire state, and are preparing to launch a statewide campaign July 1.

"The use of sweatshop labor is unacceptable in the 21st Century. Our community values human rights and workers rights and, as such, we should not, and will not, be spending taxpayer dollars on businesses that rely on inhumane and unsafe labor practices to make a buck," said Commissioner Ben Konop, who introduced the resolution.

Lucas County's sweatfree policy is unique in that it includes strong enforcement mechanisms. The policy includes a commitment for Lucas County to join a national Sweatfree Consortium of local and state governments opposed to spending taxpayer dollars on sweatshop labor. The national consortium, organized by SweatFree Communities, will pool purchasing power and create economies of scale, helping create a viable market for sweatfree manufacturing.

"We applaud Lucas County commissioners for their commitment to end tax dollar support for sweatshops," said Victoria Kaplan, Midwest Regional Organizer for SweatFree Communities. "We look forward to Governor Strickland and other elected leaders following Lucas County's lead to make our entire state sweatshop-free."

Commissioner Konop acknowledged that Lucas County has done business with the North Carolina-based Bob Barker Company that has been linked to sweatshop abuses that left 300 workers "mostly teenage girls" dead in a factory fire in Bangladesh in 2006. The factory exit doors had been illegally locked.

The proposed policy is one of the most aggressive anti-sweatshop resolutions in Ohio and nationwide. Lucas County will require contractors to certify that they are not using sweatshop labor in the manufacture of garments, uniforms, or related materials purchased with Lucas County taxpayer dollars.

The policy mandates that these contractors doing business with the county pay their workers at production facilities a living wage, adjusted by labor market; that they be afforded the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining; and be provided with safe working conditions and a non-discriminatory working environment.

“Simply stated, it's the right thing to do morally. Our community expects workers to be treated and compensated fairly and taxpayer dollars to be spent responsibly,” concluded Konop.

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SweatFree Communities coordinates a national network of grassroots campaigns that promote humane working conditions in apparel and other labor-intensive global industries by working with both public and religious institutions to adopt sweatshop-free purchasing policies. Using institutional purchasing as a lever for worker justice, the sweatfree movement empowers ordinary people to create a just global economy through local action. Learn more at www.sweatfree.org

The State and Local Government Sweatfree Consortium, comprised of states, cities, counties, local government agencies, and school districts, as well as human rights advocates and labor rights experts, will pool resources of public entities to investigate working conditions in factories that make uniforms and other products for public employees. Cities and states will hold vendors to the same standards, use the same independent monitor for enforcement, and create a market large enough to persuade companies to deal responsibly and ethically with their suppliers and workers. Learn more at www.sweatfree.org/sweatfreeconsortium