

Why have KCI negotiations with labor unions stalled?

By The Kansas City Star Editorial Board

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Negotiations between Kansas City's labor unions and the firms involved in building the new terminal at [Kansas City International Airport](#) are still stuck.

The impasse over a labor agreement at KCI doesn't threaten the project — yet. All sides may meet this week to see if they can hammer out a deal over labor and minority participation at the airport.

Dragging out the talks won't benefit the city, its travelers or the workers who will build the facility. All sides must show flexibility.

That's particularly true for union leaders now negotiating for their members.

The fundamentals of the dispute are relatively simple. [Airport developer Edgemoor](#) and its associated companies want a no-strike agreement with labor unions.

In return, [labor leaders](#) want Edgemoor to guarantee a fully unionized workforce.

Edgemoor says it can't reach that objective and still [meet ambitious participation goals](#) for minority- and women-owned businesses. Many of those companies hire workers who aren't in a union.

[Squaring that circle has proved difficult](#). In mid-March, some labor groups walked away from the negotiations. They're scheduled to resume this week.

We aren't anti-union. We firmly believe in labor's right to organize and bargain collectively. Unions have brought better wages and better working conditions for tens of thousands of families in our area.

We also support the use of union labor at KCI. Edgemoor and its builders should do everything possible to approach the goal of an all-union workforce.

But building healthy, well-financed minority- and women-owned businesses is a more critical objective. KCI must be transformational for those businesses, even if organized labor goals suffer as a result.

Edgemoor says all workers at the airport will be paid the prevailing wage. That suggests the push for 100 percent union labor is less about better wages and benefits than it is about getting new revenue and more dues-paying union members.

The terminal project should not be used for that purpose.

If labor wants to organize non-union workers at KCI, it is free to do so. But it should demonstrate the benefits of collective bargaining to those workers, rather than use the voter-approved project to force union membership on them.

To their credit, labor officials have said they want to work through these problems. Some union leaders want to increase the number of minorities and women who actually have construction jobs at the terminal, not just the number of minority businesses there.

We applaud and support that effort.

A vibrant pre-apprenticeship program, which will help disadvantaged workers learn high-paying job skills, is also essential.

[This long-running dispute](#) must not hold up progress at KCI. The developers have picked an issuer and an underwriter for the project's debt, and a firm agreement with airlines to pay for the terminal may be announced within weeks.

Demolition of Terminal A is still set for the fall, and construction work should begin in 2019.

Labor has too much to lose if the project is stalled. So does all of Kansas City. All sides, negotiating in good faith, should reach a deal that protects all interests, and soon.