Journeyman-to-apprentice bill moving toward vote

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The state Legislature is likely to soon take up a bill that would prevent state officials from requiring that more than one journeyman ever supervise any one new apprentice.

State-mandated journeyman-to-apprentice ratios now vary by trade. For carpenters, for example, the mandatory ratio is one-to-one when there is only one apprentice in a class. But for every apprentice that joins after that, three more must be added.

Senate Bill 411 and its companion bill, Assembly Bill 508,  would explicitly set the required journeyman-to-apprentice ratio at one-to-one for all trades, although an amendment a Senate panel recently adopted would carve out an exception for union apprentices whose ratio rules have been set by collective-bargaining agreements. Separately, the bill would eliminate statutory requirements that set minimum lengths for carpentry and plumbing apprenticeship programs.

The Assembly’s Committee on Transportation and Veterans Affairs held a public hearing last week on AB 508 and is expected vote on the bill and its amendment in an executive session this week.

SB 411 was approved on a 3-2 vote Oct. 12, and may get a vote on the Senate floor as early as Nov. 7. Should it be approved by both houses, it would go to Gov. Scott Walker’s desk for a signature.

Proponents of the legislation say the current ratios set up an artificial barrier to workers entering the trades. Fixing the ratio at one-to-one for all trades, they argue, would help combat the construction industry’s persistent labor shortage.

Contractors have complained that the current scarcity of skilled labor has made it difficult to find the additional journeymen needed to comply with current journeyman-to-apprentice requirements.

Those who oppose the legislation have contended that the ratios should continue to be left to the trades’ apprenticeship-advisory councils, which are made up of representatives of both labor and management interests.