

Living wage ordinance debate delayed

Stalling the discussion may prevent the ordinance from being passed; law would affect part-time city workers

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Family/Health/Education Reporter

City of Eugene staff are analyzing the impact of a proposed living wage ordinance, but the council has pushed discussion of the issue from November to a January work session.

The session switch moves the ordinance from the beginning of the budget season, where it would be included in city planning, to next year, giving the budget committee the discretion to cut the ordinance if they so choose.

"We feel that it is an obvious maneuver by the city administration to stall and prevent the living wage from being passed," Eugene-Springfield Solidarity Network organizer Sarah Jacobson said.

On Aug. 12, City Council members discussed the proposal during the first work session held in Eugene

concerning the living wage.

At the work session, the council voted unanimously to develop a city wage ordinance.

"It's the quintessential economic development strategy," City Councilor Bonny Bettman, Ward 1, said at the session. Bettman said raising city wages keeps money in the local economy, which is a sound strategy for alleviating the current recession.

In 1994, the first living wage law was passed in Baltimore, and since then, more than 80 other cities have passed similar standards. A living wage law is not a federal standard like the minimum wage. It usually focuses almost solely on full-time city workers.

However, the proposed ordinance would focus primarily on temporary and part-time city workers, who often receive lower pay. The inclusive nature of the ordinance is one of the reasons City Councilor Scott Meisner, Ward 7, chose to support it.

The proposed ordinance would also increase the income of employees of businesses that have a contract with the city, as well as employees of

businesses that receive significant financial aid from the city.

During the work session, City Councilor Nancy Nathanson, Ward 8, raised questions about the proposed ordinance but eventually rose in support of the proposal.

The effort to push the proposal, led chiefly by the Eugene-Springfield Solidarity Network, has been developing for some time.

Jacobson told the Emerald on Aug. 21 that at first the group thought the living wage should be only a few dollars above the minimum wage, but as Eugene's cost of living has risen, so have ESSN's standards for its living wage proposal.

Jacobson said that a study done by the Economic Policy Institute helped provide more impetus for new legislation. The findings showed that a one-adult, one-child family has to earn more than two times the federal poverty level to be making enough to sustain themselves.

Because it is hard to determine a living wage value, the EPI compared it to the poverty level of the adult-child, two-person family.

Paying the wage

Currently, 83 cities and counties in the United States have living wage standards in place, and 75 new campaigns are under way. Statistics gathered after the 1994 Baltimore Living Wage Ordinance was passed have shown:

- Costs did not increase significantly. The 1.2 percent was less than the rate of inflation for the same period.
- The administrative cost of monitoring and enforcement was less than 17 cents per taxpayer per year.
- Employers reported that the cost of raising wages was offset by lower employee turnover rates.

SOURCE: Eugene-Springfield Solidarity Network

The EPI's study listed \$11.42 per hour with health care benefits as an appropriate wage for a one-adult, one-child family.

The ESSN used these findings to set the wage standard for the proposed legislation and to determine what issues are at stake.

"There are two issues," University labor education instructor Lynn Feekin told the Emerald on Aug. 21. "One, it's an issue of fairness, and

two, it's an issue of accountability around the use of tax dollars." Feekin said more tax dollars should support city workers rather than being poured into city projects.

"It's very hard to gauge where this is going," Feekin said. "I assume that there will be many issues that follow, but at this point we're at the beginning of the process."

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