

Tax

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their income. Most programs set up to help low-income people, recognize that the official poverty level is far too low. That’s why most anti-poverty programs extend benefits to people earning twice and three times that level. This tax makes these struggling families pay as much as wealthy people.

It’s possible that the arts tax will be found unconstitutional

So Hales also is proposing a resolution to send the tax to the Revenue Bureau for a review. That too will go to the council for a vote this week.

It’s possible that the arts tax will be found unconstitutional. Lewis & Clark Law School professor Jack Bogdanski, who teaches tax law and also writes a blog, has filed a suit charging that the tax violates Article IX, Section 1a of the Oregon Constitution.

Why? Each person above the poverty income threshold must pay the same flat amount of \$35. In Bogdanski’s view that amounts to a head or poll tax, forbidden under the constitution.

For the moment, however, the arts tax is a go. Haynes says the mayor wants to respect voters’ intentions, but also wants to see if there are legitimate ways to soften the blow on families least able to pay.

“The mayor inherited this tax, and he doesn’t like the idea of fixing things that were part of what voters intended,” Haynes said, “So what he’s doing is addressing the unintended consequences. And then we’ll look at whether we can make changes that are in good faith with voters, the education community and the arts community.”

A well-funded campaign in favor touted the benefits to schools and to Portland’s Arts organizations. About \$9 million in arts tax revenue is projected for 2013, rising to \$12 million in 2014. Around 56 percent of that would pay for arts teachers in elementary schools in Portland School districts: Centennial, David Douglas, Parkrose, Portland Public, Reynolds, and Riverdale. The rest will go to the Regional Arts & Culture Council. The council distributes funds to arts organizations, including Oregon Ballet Theater, the Metropolitan Youth Symphony and dozens of other groups that can show they work to some extent with students.

Outreach to make sure everyone who is

Mover & Shaker



PHOTO BY KRISTIN BEADLE

Multnomah County Librarian Kirby McCurtis has been named a ‘Mover & Shaker’ by Library Journal magazine. The youth librarian at the Midlands branch, McCurtis is founder of Black Storytime for toddlers and plans to unveil a new program this spring to get more grandparents to read with their grandkids.

required to pay knows about it, also has faltered. Advocates say a substantial number of people—families who don’t speak English at home, for example, still have not heard about the tax and may not realize they are supposed to pay it.

Asked about rumors that the tax won’t be enforced because of the problems, Haynes said he knows of no such decision. “This won’t be any different from anything else that happens in Multnomah County,” he said.

Wage

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pace with the rise of inflation so that they can continue purchasing things as the costs increase, and small businesses in particular, it will allow them to continue selling to a wide variety of folks with purchasing power.

TSN: The criticism that people have is that a high minimum wage hurts small businesses – how do you respond to that?

Avakian: There are businesses that make that claim, it just hasn’t been proven true in Oregon. In 2003 when we started indexing to the consumer price index, we had 79,000 small businesses in Oregon; today we have 88,000 and we’ve proven that we can continue to keep our lowest wage earners earning enough money so that they can continue purchasing local goods. So I just don’t think that those claims have any merit when you see what’s happened in Oregon.

TSN: You must have experienced some pushback from Republicans in the Senate.

Avakian: Sen. Harkin has patterned his bill in many ways on Oregon’s example. People in DC have paid attention to Oregon’s success in tying it to the consumer price index and they invited us to come and

tell our story.

The interesting thing that comes up from the other side is, this is going to take away the jobs of young people. That’s another myth; 60 percent of the jobs that have been lost nationally are middle class jobs, the lower wage jobs are expanding and it’s very clear that those low wage earners are now mostly women and minorities of all ages, it’s not just entry-level positions for young

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people.

TSN: Can you dig into that a little bit? Because what you are talking about is raising the minimum wage at a time when most of the jobs being created nationally are minimum wage jobs in the service industry.

Avakian: There’s two different dynamics

going on there. You want your lowest wage earners at least the keep up with inflation so they can manage the cost of living increases. That doesn’t mean we want to see more low-wage jobs. We want to be able to keep our middle class jobs, but those are two different dynamics that are going on that are not necessarily related to each other.

TSN: What responsibility do you feel the business sector has for helping to bootstrap

last year – 15 cents an hour in order to keep up with the rising minimum wage. So we have 127,000 minimum wage workers in Oregon. And so by statewide raising of the wage, you’ve all the sudden pumped \$23 million through 127,000 workers back into the economy. And the minimum wage workers are not investing that money into 401Ks and mutual funds – they spend just about every dime of it on goods and services. And so the small business that’s looking at the minimum wage increase ought to be thinking in terms of the increase in revenue that they’re going to experience.

TSN: What is the most important thing for taxpayers and everyday people to know about the minimum wage issue and the need for people to make a living wage?

Avakian: Well, the minimum wage is not a living wage and none of the proposals make it that. A living wage is the ability to take care of a family, save for retirement, save for education and health care.

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up people that are falling through the cracks right now?

Avalian: Let’s not say boot strap, let’s look at it as a smart economic situation. You’re a business owner, you have a few minimum wage workers. You might have to pay them another – like we did in Oregon

Housing

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homeowners to a petition in support – take the grandmother’s cause all the way to Seattle, where they delivered to Fidelity National Title Company main office the petition signatures and a letter demanding the return of Steele’s home.

Working in combination with the Seattle group Standing Against Foreclosure and Eviction – which is organizing in support of a Seattle woman in the same situation, Judy Lovelett – the Portland activists are gearing up for a long struggle directly with the companies that profit from bundling and reselling debt.

“We have a number of people we’ve been working with for the past year, and we’re getting to the point where we think we should pressure these banks to release their

hold on these peoples’ houses,” says Ahjumu Umi, a community organizer with the Service Employees International Union who was formerly a vice president at Point One Credit Union.

In Portland, perhaps the biggest win for activists came after a 20-hour sit-in last January in the Multnomah County Sheriff’s office agitating for a moratorium on foreclosures, when County Chair Jeff Cogen announced that he agreed “in principle” to the idea.

However, a series of meetings to push a moratorium on home foreclosures in Multnomah County appears to have reached a stalemate.

The housing and employment rights activists We Are Oregon; the Blazing Arrow

Organization, plus other activists and clergy sat down with Cogan; Circuit Court Judge Nan Waller; a representative from the District Attorney’s office and Multnomah County Sheriff Dan Staton.

The activists say another meeting a few weeks ago at the City government level brought together a delegation from We Are Oregon; homeowners in foreclosure Alicia Jackson and Darren Johnson and his wife Patricia Williams; and City Commissioner Steve Novick, to discuss getting water service restored to each of their homes.

City and county officials were unable to comment on the current foreclosure status at presstime.

Umi cites a handful of Portland cases where foreclosed homeowners – with the

help of housing rights organizers – have been able to remain in their homes in the face of foreclosure, including Johnson and Williams, who are back in their house after an aggressive eviction last year involving police with pepper spray.

No law enforcement has yet tried to forcibly evict Steele.

Umi says the group’s goal is to build enough public pressure that county and state elected officials will be supported in fighting back against the banks and lending companies that are forcing homeowners out of their property while the foreclosures are challenged in court.

Find out more at www.weareoregon.org.