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Advocates Unveil Living Wage Proposal for the County

by Guy Kovner

A coalition of labor, community, environmental and faith organizations unveiled a proposal Monday to mandate a \$15-an-hour minimum “living wage” for about 5,000 workers in Sonoma County, which it said would cost up to \$12 million annually.

Most of the budgetary impact would stem from pay increases for about 3,800 in-home care providers, who are currently paid \$11.65 an hour, at a cost to the county of up to \$11.6 million, according to a fiscal assessment prepared by the coalition.

Aside from the in-home care workers, the living-wage measure would apply to about 1,200 workers employed by the county or by organizations that provide contract services to the county, hold county leases, franchises or concession agreements or receive financial assistance from the county.

“We are calling on the Board of Supervisors to address this incredible problem of income inequity in our community,” said Marty Bennett, co-chair of North Bay Jobs with Justice, one of a dozen groups in the coalition that announced the proposal Monday in a news conference at the Unitarian Universalist Church Santa Rosa.

The coalition’s campaign will “move forward this fall” with a series of public meetings, including at least one in each supervisorial district, Bennett said.

Among those attending the news conference and endorsing the proposal were Petaluma Mayor David Glass, Sonoma Councilman Ken Brown and Sebastopol Councilwoman Sarah Gurney, representing the three cities that have adopted living-wage ordinances since 2003.

Describing the measures as “the minimum first step towards human dignity,” Glass said “shame on us” for not establishing living-wage standards countywide. “This is the beginning of a journey, not the end,” he said.

At a meeting with The Press Democrat's editorial board, Bennett said he believes he has support from a majority of the supervisors but expects some resistance from business, as was the case in Sonoma.

"It's going to be a dialogue with business," he said.

Across the country, 140 cities and counties — including 33 in California — have already implemented similar living-wage ordinances, Bennett said. Organizers hope the concept will "ripple up" to the state Legislature, he said

California boosted its statewide minimum wage to \$9 an hour in July, the fourth highest in the nation. In 2016, the rate moves up to \$10 an hour.

Jonathan Coe, president of the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce, said he supports the concept of a statewide pay standard that is "equitable across the board to labor and business." But a standard that applies to "subsets of the employment universe" is problematic, he said, because it "distorts the local economy."

Coe said the chamber has not seen the coalition's proposal and has no official position on it.

If the proposal were passed by county supervisors, businesses would experience a cost increase amounting to 0.2 percent to 4.5 percent of their total revenue, depending on the industry, according to the fiscal assessment by Jeannette Wicks-Lim, assistant research professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

The annual cost increase to those businesses would be about \$435,000, her report said.

The \$12 million total cost to the county equals just under 1 percent of the county's \$1.4 billion annual budget, it said.

But it identified an "above average impact" of about \$500,000 a year on the Sonoma County Fair from boosting the pay for 600 temporary workers, who make minimum or near minimum wages, to \$15 an hour. To fully offset that cost, the fair could raise adult general admission tickets from \$11 to \$11.60, the report said.

Fair officials did not return a call seeking comment Monday.

Bennett noted that the proposed \$15 "living wage" falls far short of the amount needed for economic self-sufficiency. The California Budget Project, an independent think tank, says that a Sonoma County family of four with two working parents needs

each worker to make \$20.51 an hour to meet housing, food, child care, transportation, health care, taxes and other necessary expenses.

Bonita Munoz, a living-wage coalition member and an in-home care provider, said she works 12 hours a day for two clients, making \$11.65 an hour to support herself, her disabled husband and an adult son with special needs.

“We struggle every day,” Munoz said. At \$15 an hour, she said, “we wouldn’t have to choose between buying food or paying the electric bill.”

For more information on the living-wage proposal, go to northbayjobswithjustice.org.