

Local Coalition Unveils Living Wage Ordinance

by Jenna Polito Staff Writer

Could affect up to 5,000 low-wage workers

On Monday, a local coalition comprised of labor, faith, environmental and community organizations unveiled a living wage ordinance that may affect up to 5,000 low-wage workers in Sonoma County.

The coalition plans to present the ordinance, which mandates a \$15 per hour wage for workers employed with the county or in businesses tied to the county, to the Board of Supervisors this fall. Currently, minimum wage in Sonoma County is set at the state rate of \$9 per hour.

Covered workers would include regular county employees; in-home supportive services workers; county service contractors with contracts of at least \$20,000 for for-profits and \$50,000 for non-profits; lease, concession and franchise agreement holders with gross receipts greater than \$350,000; and recipients of business subsidies from the county exceeding \$100,000, according to a statement from the coalition. Private businesses not tied to the county as illustrated above would not be affected by the legislation.

For Marty Bennett, who is co-chair of North Bay Jobs with Justice and an instructor emeritus at Santa Rosa Junior College, the ordinance constitutes a step forward in the movement to protect workers' rights and help often-marginalized groups such as Latinos, African Americans and single women to achieve self-sufficiency through their wages.

"Bottom line, living wage is about: what is a wage that will enable a worker or workers to support them?" he said. "It's about wages that are commensurate with the cost of living."

He pointed to data from the Economic Policy Institute, which finds that a family of three in Sonoma County would need an annual budget of \$66,840 to achieve self-sufficiency to the point of being able to afford basics such as housing, food, transportation and healthcare. While the current \$9 per hour California minimum wage amounts to a dual earner income of merely \$37,440, the proposed \$15 per hour minimum wage would close that gap to \$62,400.

And while the statewide minimum wage will increase to \$10 per hour in January, the amount still falls far beneath workers' compensation needs, Bennett said. "If we had

adjusted the California State minimum wage every year since the late 1960s just for inflation, it would be about \$11.80 an hour today,” he said, “and it’ll be \$10 next year, but it’s far from a living wage.”

While he also does not believe that \$15 per hour amounts to a true living wage, “it’s what we think is politically possible,” he said.

These wage increases are part of a package of provisions to help increase labor standards. The ordinance would also provide workers 22 days off per year, with 12 days compensated at the living wage rate, and requires that county contractors offer existing part-time employees the ability to work more hours before hiring new part-time employees.

Additional “Responsible Bidder” legislation would require county service contracts over \$20,000 to certify their history as an employer, and their past record of compliance with federal and state labor, health and safety and environmental regulations.

In addition to unveiling the proposed ordinance, the coalition presented an independent study that outlines costs associated with the wage increases. Dr. Jeannette Wicks-Lim, who is an assistant research professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and authored the study, reports that increased wages would result in “relatively modest cost increases” for employers, falling in the range of .2 to 4.5 percent of total revenue. Costs transferred to the county would amount to less than .03 percent of the county’s total \$1.4 billion budget.

“There have been a lot of different studies on minimum wage ordinances,” Wicks-Lim said, “so you can look at my numbers for Sonoma County and compare it to what other places have found. And particularly with cities in this area, the numbers fall right in line with each other. They’re very similar. So I think we have a pretty good idea how much these living wage ordinances cost.”

Wages for IHSS (in-home supportive service) workers account for the highest cost increases of all covered workers, accounting for .4 or .9 percent of the county’s total budget, a total equivalent to \$37 to \$73 per Sonoma County household.

The local living wage ordinance reflects a statewide, and even national, conversation about what constitutes fair compensation. When drafting the ordinance, Bennett said the coalition drew inspiration from the movement to bring a \$15 dollar minimum to Seattle. In November, voters in San Francisco will decide whether to increase the city’s minimum wage to \$15 an hour in 2018.

The conversation proves important, according to Wicks-Lim, because national data shows that low-wage jobs aren’t going away over the long term, but are increasing.

She has studied biannual projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that show that over a ten year period, low wage jobs account for the vast majority of job growth.

“The question’s going to be more about, how do we change the quality of these jobs,” she said, “Not that we can look to some new set of jobs that are going to change the living standards of workers.”

With guidance from the 12-year-old coalition, three local cities have already passed living wage laws, including Sebastopol, Petaluma and Sonoma. Currently, Sebastopol’s living wage is set at \$16.13 without benefits, and \$14.63 with medical benefits.

The coalition includes organizations such as the North Bay Organizing Project, North Bay Jobs with Justice, the North Bay Labor Council, the Sierra Club and Sonoma County Conservation Action.

The coalition plans to host town hall meetings in the coming months to discuss the living wage ordinance. Those interested may soon visit a new website, www.northbayjobswithjustice.org.