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**Earning a Living Wage in Sonoma County**
by Martin J. Bennett

A coalition of labor, faith, environmental, and community organizations has proposed a Living Wage Ordinance to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. Over the past year, the coalition has both lobbied the Supervisors and County staff, and conducted an extensive public education campaign.

The law would mandate an hourly wage of $15/hr. for all workers employed by the county, large county contractors and employers receiving county subsidies or leasing county property.

More than 5,500 low-wage workers, including park aides, janitors, security guards, County Fair temp employees, and about 3,800 home-care providers, would receive wage increases.

Why is a Living Wage law needed?

**Whose Recovery?**

Corporate profits surged to record levels in 2013 and 95 percent of income gains from economic recovery since 2010 went to the top 1 percent of earners. This polarization of wealth and incomes means widespread hard times for California and Sonoma County working people.

· According to the California Budget Project (CBP), from 1987-2012 California developed an unprecedented income distribution gap, as average adjusted gross incomes of upper 1 percent earners skyrocketed by 125 percent, while average incomes of the bottom four-fifths declined.

· CBP reports that hourly inflation-adjusted wages for the bottom 50 percent of California workers declined from 1979-2013. Wages for those in the top 20 percent of income distribution data increased by 17 percent, while hourly wages for the lowest 20 percent decreased by 12 percent.

· California’s real median household income in 2013 was only slightly above its 1997 level at $57,442 (and did not exceed the previous peaks in 2000 and 2006). California’s middle class is going nowhere.

· Current U.S. Census data show that one-third of Sonoma County’s families were working poor in 2013, with at least one member reporting income from work, but earning less than $47,100 annually for a family of four.

**Low-Wage Jobs and the Missing Middle**

The most important cause of growing inequality is that the economy is not creating decent jobs. According to a 2014 National Employment Law Project report, 22 percent of lost jobs in the 2007-2009 recession were in the low-wage service sector, paying less than $14/hr.

During the 2010-2014 recovery, 44 percent of added jobs were low-wage, and increasingly part-time and temporary. Only one in five of the new jobs created after 2010 were mid-wage jobs, paying between $14-$20/hr.

A new Metropolitan Transportation Agency (MTC) report for the nine-county Bay Area confirms national labor market trends. Across the Bay Area, most of the approximately 1.1 million low-wage workers are ‘trapped’ in low-wage jobs for much of their working lives. In each county the number of low-wage jobs is expanding, and the number of mid-wage jobs contracting, even as the economy grows.

Too many low-wage workers lack the educational background and basic skills to even qualify for mid-wage jobs. Many low-wage workers must work two jobs. Their work schedules also may be unpredictable from week to week, so they have no time for pursuing educational opportunities outside work, and most cannot afford the costs of job training and necessary childcare.

Sonoma County reflects these national and regional trends. According to 2013 California Employment Development Department data, 40 percent of new 2010-2020 jobs in Sonoma County pay no more than $15/hr. and 50 percent pay less than $20/hr. These low-wage jobs are concentrated in the rapidly growing service sector, including food services and hospitality, personal care and homecare, retail trade, and temporary help.

In contrast, Massachusetts Institute of Technology researchers estimate that a 2013 living or self-sufficiency wage in Sonoma County is $22.12/hr. for two parents, each working full-time to support two children—just to pay for food, housing, health care, transportation and childcare, without relying on any public assistance programs.

Raising the wage floor is therefore fundamental to any comprehensive strategy for reducing income inequality and poverty in Sonoma County. Strategies such as Early Childhood Education, affordable housing, and job training are critical, but no substitute for boosting wages.

**A Living Wage Law is Affordable**

Sonoma County can afford a living wage law. Prior to 2007, the counties of Marin, Sacramento, San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Ventura, and Los Angeles all adopted living wage laws and found the costs manageable, even when revenues dropped during the Great Recession.

University of Massachusetts economist Dr. Jeannette Wicks-Lim estimates that the full cost of implementing the proposed living wage law is 0.9 percent of Sonoma County's total $1.4 billion budget for 2014-2015—about $70 per household. Sebastopol (2003), Sonoma (2004), and Petaluma (2006) have incurred similar costs from living wage laws. Sonoma County property tax revenues increased in 2014, and the Supervisors can enhance General Fund revenue with a small increase in the transit occupancy tax (hotel/lodging bed tax).

**Building The Movement**

To implement a Living Wage Ordinance, the Board of Supervisors must recognize the central problem of job quality, and the economy's slow addition of new living wage jobs, particularly for workers with limited education and skills.

The Supervisors must also understand that California's $9.00/hr. minimum wage is less than half of a self-sufficiency/living wage for the County, which is currently more than $22/hr.

The Supervisors also should know that a living wage law would have a huge impact on a limited number of County and County contractor's employees, such as homecare workers earning $11.65/hr and janitors earning $9.00/hr.

Most importantly, the Board needs to recognize that, absent federal or state action to raise the minimum wage, cities and counties can do so. Over time, local actions have informed the public and mobilized public opinion to influence the state and federal governments.  Since early 2014, when Seattle implemented a citywide $15/hr. minimum wage law, many cities have followed:

· San Francisco adopted the citywide minimum wage of $15/hr. and Oakland approved a $12.25/hr. citywide minimum wage by ballot initiative.

· Richmond, Berkeley, Sunnyvale, and Mountain View City Councils also approved citywide minimum wage laws, ranging from $12 - $15/hr.

· Last December,the County of Santa Clara implemented the highest ($19/hr.) and most comprehensive living wage law in the nation.

**Raising the Wage Floor Across the Bay Area and the State of California**

As the MTC report recommended, other Bay Area cities and counties are moving toward a region-wide minimum wage, substantially higher than the state minimum.  Last summer corporate Democrats in the California legislature shot down a bill to raise the statewide minimum wage of $13/hr. by 2017. The bill has been introduced again, and will be considered during the 2015 legislative session.

As other cities and counties across the state implement wage laws, their actions will send a message to the legislature and the governor to raise the state minimum wage.

Sonoma County's Department of Health report, "A Portrait of Sonoma," urges that the County "ensure that all jobs, including those that do not require a college degree, pay wages that afford workers the dignity of self-sufficiency and the peace of mind of economic security."  It explicitly calls for building upon other living wage ordinances implemented in the County to "raise the wage floor further."

Approving a living wage law is the right thing to do!  Taxpayers should not fund poverty-wage jobs, and public sector employment should be the model for private employers.

Sonoma County should raise the wage floor and join the Fight for $15 now!

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