

# El Cerrito takes first steps toward increasing minimum wage

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EL CERRITO -- Following action by some nearby communities and an emerging countywide campaign to raise the minimum wage, the City Council is moving to put its own higher floor under wages for workers in El Cerrito.

The issue was at the fore during a Tuesday study session that had four presenters, including county Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond, who is leading the effort to create a standard minimum wage throughout Contra Costa.

Although El Cerrito has yet to take action, the Bay Area is in the forefront of the movement to create local minimum wages, with Oakland voters electing to create a minimum wage of \$12.25 per hour, above the state standard of \$9 per hour.

Berkeley has an \$11 per hour minimum that is set to go to \$12.53 on Oct. 1 of next year, while Richmond is at \$9.60 an hour now and will go to \$11.52 on Jan. 1, according to an El Cerrito staff study.

Nationwide, it's a different story, with only 24 cities and counties electing to deviate from national and statewide standards, according to presenter Mariana Moore, director of Ensuring Opportunity Campaign to Cut Poverty in Contra Costa.

Higher wages overall and the higher cost of living in the Bay Area have squeezed workers at the bottom of the wage scale, according to the study.

Contra Costa has a median family income of \$74,353, compared with a \$37,440 annual wage for a couple who both work full-time at the minimum wage.

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The majority of minimum wage workers are employed by restaurants and retail stores, according to Moore, who said, "We have a growing economy, but it's not growing for everybody."

After hearing the presentations, all five council members seemed disposed to set a minimum wage of at least \$15 an hour by 2020 and phased in incrementally, perhaps beginning next year.

The council also directed staff members to look into the implications of moving to \$15 an hour as early as 2018, with subsequent changes based on increases in the Consumer Price Index.

One business owner, out of about 30 members of the public in attendance, spoke against the move.

Kevin O'Neal, owner of the Well Grounded Tea & Coffee Bar on Stockton Avenue, said some of his beginning workers are at the \$9 an hour state-mandated minimum but that he is paying his more experienced personnel above that.

"If we have a higher city minimum wage, I will have to move away from giving merit-based raises," O'Neal said. "It will be hard for us to stay in business if I have to pay everyone what I'm paying my most experienced workers now."

O'Neal estimated that, considering the hours he and his wife are putting in, they are only making about \$10 an hour each themselves.

Partly in response, the council directed staff members to consider what could be done to help what Councilman Greg Lyman called "homegrown" El Cerrito businesses, such as Well Grounded, if a citywide minimum wage is enacted.

The council also considered other issues connected to minimum wage laws, including mandatory paid sick leave, slower phase-ins for small businesses, and enforcement mechanisms, including liens on employers who owe back wages.

The council decided to put off considering mandatory sick leave, but directed Community Outreach Analyst Suzanne Iarla to research the pros and cons of slower wage phase-ins for some business categories.

The council agreed the city does not have the resources to provide enforcement, but could ally with the county or other cities to investigate possible violations.

"We need to rely on external support (for enforcement)," Lyman said.

Iarla said the city will consult with the El Cerrito Chamber of Commerce and other business groups and hold community meetings with a goal of creating an ordinance for consideration before the end of the year.