

Living wage measure advances

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Council directs attorney to work on ordinance proposal

In front of a standing-room-only crowd at City Hall, Santa Barbara's City Council decided to move ahead with a living-wage ordinance that would apply only to its service contractors, not nonprofit organizations or city workers.

Only Councilman Dan Secord opposed the living wage in all forms. Dr. Secord, a fiscal conservative, said the city's budget problems are just too big to consider paying employees more.

Earlier in the day, the council approved a \$96 million general fund budget that included a \$7.4 million deficit.

"This is a horrible time to do this," Dr. Secord said.

"It's a horrible time to start this process. It's just another one of those 6-1 things we're going to have from time to time."

All of the details still need to be worked out.

The council directed the city attorney to work on a proposed ordinance and then return the matter to the city's three-member ordinance and finance committees by late September.

The nearly four-hour meeting included some heartfelt pleas from backers of a living wage, wearing red ribbons to show their support for paying workers more money.

"If we continue to allow the poor to get poorer and the rich to get richer, while doing nothing about it, we have failed life's mission," longtime Santa Barbara resident George Solinas said.

The living wage typically incites fierce debate between liberal activists and fiscal conservatives warring about free market versus government control.

As the just-adopted budget stands, the city must make several budget adjustments that will result in higher fees and reduced services, while spending \$3.5 million in reserves.

Based on the council's vote on Tuesday night, the living-wage ordinance would not immediately hit the city's bottom line -- it would have more of an effect on contractors.

In the proposal floated by the activists, companies that have contracts of more than \$10,000 with the city would have to pay employees \$15.40 an hour without health benefits are \$13.40 an hour with benefits.

Those numbers would allow recipients to spend only 30 percent of their income on housing, activists say, the goal of a "living wage."

But the city strayed away from those numbers on Tuesday night and will start examining the issue from scratch.

Complicating matters, this is an election year for the council, and the activists pushing the living wage have clout.

Three members of the council are running for re-election, and Dr. Secord must leave the council because of term limits.

He could run for mayor but has not publicly indicated that he will do that.

After listening to more than 40 speakers, mostly in favor of a living wage, City Councilwoman Iya Falcone appeared to take the lead, swiftly calling for a vote as the council began deliberations.

A majority of the City Council opted not to include about 520 of its own "hourly employees," which would have cost the city about \$1.8 million, according to a proposal floated by the activists.

Most of the council agreed that because those 520 hourly employees are represented by a union, their salaries will be negotiated appropriately during those labor negotiations.

"I am a huge supporter of collective bargaining," Ms. Falcone said. "Always have been, always will be. We will come to a fair agreement. I have absolutely no doubt about it."

Councilman Das Williams opposed excluding city workers, preferring that they be covered by an ordinance rather than relying on union negotiations with different councils in the future.

All of the council members agreed that the nonprofit groups should be exempted but given incentives to pay a living wage.

Some people representing the business community spoke against a living wage.

"We think there would be unintended consequences to impose this on small businesses and nonprofits," said Steve Cushman, executive director of the Santa Barbara Region Chamber of Commerce.

Representatives from the Santa Barbara Zoo opposed the idea of nonprofits being considered.

But the activists from a cross-section of community organizations, countered that Santa Barbara should show leadership and pass the ordinance.

"This is a cheap, easy, inexpensive way for all seven of you to do something about an important national issue," Daraka Larimore-Hall said.

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LEN WOOD / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Lisa Pompatarin, wearing a red ribbon in support of a living-wage ordinance in Santa Barbara, listens to speakers talk about the issue at a nearly four-hour City Council meeting on Tuesday evening at City Hall.