

Governor supports minimum wage increase

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SANTA FE – An economist for a group of advocates seeking an increase in New Mexico's minimum wage said Wednesday that hiking salaries will not hurt the economy.

Gerry Bradley, an economist and research director for New Mexico Voices for Children, said 14 other states and the District of Columbia have all passed increases in the minimum wage. The vast majority of those states have seen job growth, even in sectors such as retail, which are typically most impacted by an increase in the minimum wage, Bradley said in a report released Wednesday during a press conference in Albuquerque.

A group of more than 40 New Mexico organizations, united under the banner "New Mexicans for a Fair Wage," announced plans last month to seek an increase in the minimum wage from the current \$5.15 federal level to \$7.50 an hour. Speaker of the House Ben Lujan, D-Santa Fe, and Senate President Pro Temp. Ben Altamirano, D-Silver City, have both signed on as supporters.

Gov. Bill Richardson said Wednesday that he supports some kind of increase in the minimum wage, but hasn't yet decided on the \$7.50 level, or

what exceptions should be included.

"I'm going to meet with the business groups this week and with the coalition next week," Richardson said. "And, I'll come out with my own proposal immediately before the session starts. I may announce it in the State of the State."

Richardson said they were considering things such as a rural differential for those living in small communities, whether cities should be able to pre-empt the state and federal minimum wages and if small employers should get an exemption.

"I do believe that an increase is needed, no question," Richardson said.

Bradley noted that the federal minimum wage has not increased from \$5.15 an hour since 1997. Workers earning the minimum wage have lost 20 percent of their buying power since the last hike, he said.

And, New Mexico has a higher percentage of workers making at or below minimum wage than any other state in the nation, according to a study last year by Voices for Children.

Bradley pointed to the city of Santa Fe, where voters approved increasing the minimum wage to \$8.50 an hour, as proof that the economy can thrive in areas where the mini-

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num wage has increased.

"Santa Fe is our own economic success story that testifies to the economic benefits of increasing the minimum wage in New Mexico," Bradley said in a prepared statement. "Job growth has accelerated in the hospitality and food service sectors in Santa Fe. When we look to other states, we see clear trends of poverty reduction and sustained job growth."

But John Carey, president of the New Mexico Association of Commerce and Industry, said numerous studies have been conducted since the federal minimum wage was first enacted, and with mixed results.

It's often difficult to isolate any one specific reason why jobs were gained or lost, Carey said.

One thing the studies did show, Carey said, is those who do get laid off when minimum wages are increased tend to be teen-agers.