

Fair wage group holds meeting

By Diane Fowler
Beacon staff writer

GRANTS – New Mexicans for a Fair Wage held a meeting last week at the Future Families Foundation in Grants to explain their goals and plans for the upcoming legislative session in Santa Fe. The group's primary goal is to raise the minimum wage in News Mexico to \$7.50 per hour.

The grass roots organization is based in Albuquerque, but organizes statewide to build support for legislation and

conduct research. In its mission statement the organization states, "Increasing the minimum wage is both a moral and economic imperative for New Mexico."

The group states that it seeks three major ways to improving economic conditions: raise the minimum wage in New Mexico to \$7.50 per hour; tie future raises to the index of inflation (cost of living) and protecting municipalities' rights to raise local minimum wage rates above the state minimum.

Gerry Bradley, an economist formerly with the New Mexico Department of Labor, who currently works with the group and does extensive research on the effects of higher minimum wages on local economies, spoke at the Grants meeting. "Research done in 14 states shows that there is no relation between raising wages and slowing job growth," Bradley said.

He gave a brief history of minimum wage changes in the U.S. in recent years. "In the

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1980s twenty-four states raised the minimum wage on their own following inaction from the federal government. The last federal raise was in 1997 and it's since lost 20 percent of its value," Bradley reported. "Recently 18 states including the District of Columbia have raised their minimum wage rates."

Bradley said that the highest proportion of minimum wage earners in the state are Hispanic women working in the hospital-ity industry. The figure is based on the last census. "We've found a correlation between higher wages and productivity and employee retention," he said.

Bradley explained that most employers in the state actually pay more than the minimum wage; the average is \$6.70 per hour and new employers to the state generally pay more than \$8 per hour.

The conventional wisdom is that higher wages will result in higher retail prices, but Bradley

said that wage increases actually account for only one percent of the cost of a sale.

Representative Ken Martinez was also present at the meeting, and asked Bradley if the proposed new minimum wage will apply to tipped employees and agricultural workers. Martinez noted that state lawmakers from the southern part of the state want to exempt these workers from any new minimum wage statute. Bradley replied that existing exemptions, including tipped employees and agricultural workers, would still apply.

Martinez said that he thought the urban versus rural tension in terms of wages was somewhat artificial. "It's true that it's more expensive to live in cities, but if a person is doing the same work in a rural community, he should be paid the same wages. There's also the need to keep young people in rural towns and they won't stay if they're underpaid," he said.

Bradley noted that a phase-in of a new wage rate was accept-

able. There would likely be situations where new employees would come in at a wage it had taken veteran employees several years to reach and that would be a suitable scenario for a phase-in.

New Mexicans for a Fair Wage counts many New Mexico organizations as coalition members, including the Democratic Party, the Green Party, New Mexico AFL-CIO, New Mexico Conference of Churches, New Mexico Voices for Children and Hispano Roundtable of New Mexico. The group's goals are endorsed by many current and former state legislators, current and former Albuquerque city councilors, Mayor Ron Ortiz of Grants and Trustee Dominick Vigil of Milan.

The group has planned a day of lobbying in Santa Fe on Jan. 31, 2006, and invites all interested parties to attend. For information call (505) 242-7411 or e-mail mnacorn@acorn.org.