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Commentary: Wage worth living with

City Council's proposal to raise income is a good start to compromising

By Sharon Kayne
April 13, 2006

When it comes to making laws and shaping public policy, compromise sounds like a dirty word to a lot of people.

But the truth is, it's often the only way to get things done. That we have compromised does not mean we've left our convictions, passions, moral values and self-respect behind. It simply means we're as realistic as we are idealistic.

OK. It also means we don't have a veto-proof majority of like-minded pols all rolled into one governing body. Which is why we can support City Councilor Martin Heinrich's proposal to raise the minimum wage.

TODAY'S BYLINE
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It's not everything we hoped for, but it beats continuing to try and pay the rent and buy luxuries like food on \$5.15 an hour, 40 hours a week. What we'd really like to see is an instant increase in the minimum wage to what it would be if it were adjusted for inflation - \$7.50 an hour.

That's right, if the minimum wage was increased periodically the way our middle-class, raises-for-the-cost-of-living wages are, we wouldn't be having this discussion. And the state Senate would've had to find some other contentious issue to argue about until the closing moments of the session.

We'd prefer a minimum wage increase that covered the whole state. We'd also prefer that this current proposal include indexing to rise with inflation so we don't end up right back here in another decade screaming about how the buying power of the minimum wage isn't what it was 10 years ago.

As it is - assuming it's passed unamended and signed - Albuquerque's minimum wage will go up to \$6.75 at the beginning of 2007, hit \$7.15 in 2008 and top out at \$7.50 in 2009. By then, who knows? An hour's work at minimum wage might still buy a single gallon of gas. Employers of tipped workers will have to make up the difference - if there is one - so that tips and salary together equal the new minimum hourly wage.

After 2009, the minimum wage will be subject to what Councilor Heinrich calls "political indexing." In other words, the earning power of the working poor will be at the mercy of both the fickle economy and the shifting winds of politics and its players.

On the other hand, this ordinance is not loaded with exemptions that would allow, for example, employers to pay trainees less or deduct the cost of company toilet paper from their paychecks (as one legislator famously, and probably regrettably, suggested). Ditching the exemptions is one in our "we got what we wanted" column.

While we're on the subject of getting what we've always wanted, we'd love to see people finally let go of their tired old stereotypes about the working poor. It'd be great if people realized that the average minimum wage earner is not a burger-flipping teenager or lettuce-picking migrant. The vast majority of low-wage earners are, in fact, over the age of 20.

Most are women and many have families to support. They make up the unseen labor force we so happily take for granted - cleaning up after us at the office and in our hotel rooms, taking our phone orders for fancy underwear and looking after our drooling babies and grandparents so we don't have to.

It'd be nice, too, if people realized that when these folks earn more money, they return the generosity in kind by purchasing more extravagant luxuries - like clothing for their children.

Higher wages for everyone means a more vibrant economy, with higher employment rates, not lower. Better-paid employees are happier, more productive employees. Lower employee turnover means lower recruiting, hiring and training costs for employers.

It'd also be nice if those prognosticators of a doomsday economic scenario would realize that many small, locally owned businesses actually already pay well above the current minimum wage, so this won't bite into their profits.

This ordinance is really a statement of moral values and an affirmation of the dignity of work. If it happens to bite into some CEO's seven-digit salary or a few shareholders' profits, then so be it. Much as we try, we have a hard time mustering any great sympathy for them.

Sadly, we can't pass an ordinance outlawing outdated stereotypes. But we can, at long last, pass a raise in the minimum wage. And we can work on passing similar ordinances in other municipalities around the state. And, yes, we'll probably have to make some compromises to get it done.

When working families are guaranteed a fair wage, we can live with that.

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