
Sonoma Index-Tribune

Supervisors get living wage report

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At some point Friday, Blue Sky Consulting Group is expected to present the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors with a detailed living wage analysis. Commissioned by the Supervisors last June, the report is expected to reach conclusions about poverty and quality of life within the county and offer Supervisors a road map for the possible creation of a county living wage.

“We are all waiting for the report by the consultants and then we have to determine what is best for the county,” said Supervisor David Rabbitt, who currently chairs the board.

Supervisors are expected to hold a public meeting on the Blue Sky report on Nov. 24. Blue Sky, an Oakland-based public-policy consulting firm, stated their study would be “dynamic” and include the “likely effects on poverty and the economy” of a countywide living wage. Blue Sky analysts said they would “model the likely effects of any such policy on poverty, employment, and the county’s economy overall.”

“In addition, we will assess the impact of policy alternatives or variations, such as exemptions from a living wage for certain types of businesses or classes of workers,” stated Blue Sky in its preparatory report issued on June 16. “Finally, we will assess the fiscal impact of each policy on the Sonoma County budget.”

The city of Sonoma passed a municipal living wage ordinance in 2004. The city’s current wage is \$15.76 an hour. On Sept. 15, the Sonoma City Council endorsed the idea of a living wage for the entire county, and had the city manager write a letter “strongly urging” Supervisors to support a living wage ordinance.

“Creating a regional, cohesive approach towards addressing wage equity throughout all areas of the county will begin by adoption of this ordinance,” wrote Sonoma City Manager Carol Giovanatto in an Oct. 6 letter to the Supervisors. “We look forward to having the County join the City of Sonoma as a Living Wage leader.”

Thirty-three California cities and counties have adopted similar measures, including the counties of Sacramento, San Francisco, and Santa Cruz. In Sonoma County, Sebastopol adopted a municipal living wage in 2003, which currently stands at \$16.13 an hour. Petaluma adopted a municipal living wage in 2006, which currently stands at \$15.32 per hour. A competing proposal by the coalition known as North Bay Jobs for Justice, is calling for an immediate county living wage ordinance of \$15 per hour, with future wages tied to the annual Consumer Price Index.

“By approving this, the Board of Supervisors can provide the leadership and vision necessary to address the growing inequality and crisis of low-wage work in the county,” said North Bay Jobs for Justice coordinator Martin Bennett.

Bennett said the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, and the California minimum wage of \$9 per hour, had a lower ratio of earnings to profits than at any time in the last 50 years. He said his organization talked to Blue Sky and whatever their conclusions, he expected it to take months before a final ordinance could be established for the county.

“Part of what we are doing is educating the Supervisors,” said Bennett. “The current situation undermines job quality and does not protect workers.”

Bennett said 28 percent of the county’s population was families earning less than \$44,000 a year.

“Between 2008 and 2018, more than 50 percent of the jobs created in the county will pay less than \$15 an hour,” said Bennett.

North Bay Jobs for Justice’s ordinance would cover Sonoma county employees and all county service contracts. It would provide county employees up to 22 days off per year (12 paid and 10 unpaid). It would also cover County In-Home Supportive Service care workers, whom supporters claim have been left out by municipal living wage ordinances in the county. IHSS workers assist the County’s low-income elderly and disabled adults. They currently earn \$11.65 per hour.

Jeannette Wicks-Lim, of the University of Massachusetts Political Economy Research Institute provided an assessment of the added costs to the County by raising the wages of IHSS employees. Wicks-Lim said the higher pay for IHSS workers could “improve IHSS services and enable more low income frail elderly and disabled adults to remain living at home.”

“This would reduce government spending on nursing care facilities and give the state a financial incentive to re-negotiate its IHSS cost sharing arrangement,” said Wicks-Lim in a September letter of support.

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