

Living-wage measure faces debate

Santa Cruz council urged to pass phased version of ordinance

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SANTA CRUZ — The newest version of the city's living-wage proposal pushes implementation off until at least September.

In a staff report on the issue, City Councilman Tim Fitzmaurice, who chairs the Living Wage Task Force, recommends passing a phased version of the ordinance at a September study session. In the meantime, Fitzmaurice said, council members who have requested additional information will have time to review the plan.

At a June 27 council meeting, council members Michael Rotkin and Katherine Beiers asked for details about the costs of implementing a living-wage ordinance covering city employees.

Council members Cynthia Mathews and Michael Hernandez are abstaining from the discussion because of conflicts of interest, so four of the remaining five council members must support any proposal for it to pass.

The council has three options, according to a memo from Fitzmaurice to the Living Wage Task Force, which met last week:

- Do nothing and wait for a better time to act.

- Attempt to provide Rotkin and Beiers with more information and attempt to pass some version of the living-wage resolution Tuesday, boosting the minimum pay from about \$7 per hour to \$13 per hour, likely in phases.

- Put the issue off until September while directing staff to begin preparing the studies necessary to understand the costs and begin negotiating with the Service Employees International Union to represent the city's 628 temporary workers.

The third option, though, might not result in raising the pay of temporary workers up to about \$13 per hour by the 2001-02 fiscal year, said Cliff Tillman, head of the union's Local 415. SEIU already represents most of the city's permanent unclassified employees.

Tillman said the union is "excited" about the prospect of representing the city's temporary staff — a segment of the work force that unions typically have shied away from organizing.

"It's been hard in the past to organize them, because they are not there for long," he said. "But now temporary worker is just a title. People are there year after year and it's more stable."

The council voting to pursue that option would not automatically result in union representation, Tillman noted. Temporary workers still need to hold an election and decide if they want a union. But most temporary work-



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Errol Griffin has groomed the ball diamonds at Harvey West Park for more than eight years. He calls it his 'dream job,' but he must live with his parents because rent is so high.

ers who spoke to the Sentinel said they'd like union representation.

"It would definitely make it feel like I have some kind of job security," said Nick Gullo, a temporary worker at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium. "As it is now, they can just say, 'Sorry, you don't work here anymore.'"

Fitzmaurice also proposes in his memo that a monitoring system be set up for non-profit contractors that receive city funding and therefore could be mandated to increase pay for their employees. Representatives of the Coalition for a Living Wage, the organization of community activists, labor leaders and others who have championed the pay raise, have opposed such a monitoring system, saying they don't think it will be necessary.

"How can you guarantee me that non-profits won't take the money we give them and use it to hire more people instead of increasing pay?" Fitzmaurice asked at the task force meeting July 17.

Sandy Brown from the coalition said it would be too risky for the groups, which already receive much of their funding from the city, to go against the city's mandates.

Jim Cavanaugh of the Dane County South Central Labor Federation gives the same explanation for why a living-wage ordinance has worked in that Wisconsin county. As proposed in Santa Cruz, both Dane County and the city of Madison, Wis. have ordinances that require social-service groups receiving city funding to raise their pay scales.

As in Santa Cruz, Cavanaugh said the social-service groups had been reporting high turnover because pay wasn't keeping pace with inflation. The Dane County Living Wage Campaign insisted the county help pay for raises at the agencies.

"What the county did before the living-wage ordinance even passed was put aside some catch-up money to ease the transition. Then

it was phased in. But it was presupposed from the beginning that the county would pay for the increase in non-profits because many of those groups are funded solely by the county," Cavanaugh said.

"And the penalties are pretty heavy here for not following the rules. They lose their funding, and when most of that money comes from the county, they can't afford to not follow the rules."

One thing that's different about the living-wage proposal in Santa Cruz is that the amounts are higher than anywhere else in the country, said Jen Kern, head of the ACORN Living Wage Resource Center in Washington, D.C.

Cambridge, Mass., pays its lowest-wage workers \$10 per hour and Kankakee, Ill. set a figure of \$11.42 for certain workers.

San Francisco County supervisors are discussing a change to their living-wage ordinance, reducing it from \$11 to \$10 per hour in the 2001-02 fiscal year. Kern said it was a pragmatic move and not necessarily representative of what it actually costs to live in the city.

"In the movement in general, people try to set the proposed living wage at what they think they can get," she said. "Generally it's based on some level of the federal poverty line for a family of four, and is high enough above the current minimum wage to drive home the fact that it's not really the minimum people need to live on."

"In San Francisco, they chose to reduce their living wage in order for it to apply to a broader range of people. That's a tactical decision they made. But in many places, the actual living wage is way higher than anything on the books."