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# LOCAL NEWS

## REASONABLE PAY

# Measure sets sights on wage increase

SJSU students push initiative to hike hourly minimum up to \$10

By Sharon Noguchi

snoguchi@mercurynews.com

San Jose State University students have parlayed a class assignment on social justice into a potential ballot measure that could affect tens of thousands of San Jose workers, by raising the minimum wage 25 percent to \$10 an hour.

If the initiative succeeds, backers say San Jose could join San Francisco, Santa Fe, N.M., and Washington, D.C., as the only cities in the United States setting minimum wages. San Jose's minimum wage would be higher than both the state's \$8 an hour minimum and the federal government's \$7.25 an hour minimum.

"We're all struggling with paying rent and bills," said Leila McCabe, 30, a senior who was in Scott Myers-Lipton's Social Action class last semester and who has worked several low-paying jobs. "To find out San Jose is behind in paying people better wages was a shock to us."

Students filed paperwork Thursday at City Hall to begin circulating a petition. If they then gather enough voter signatures, a measure could be placed on the November ballot. If passed, San Jose businesses would have to pay workers at least \$10 an hour, with annual increases pegged to the Consumer Price Index.

San Jose already sets a "liv-

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ing wage" policy, requiring businesses contracting with the city to pay workers at least \$13.59 an hour, or \$14.84 an hour if they do not provide health insurance.

Labor welcomed the initiative.

"Working people in San Jose desperately need higher wages," said Cindy Chavez, executive officer of the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council. "It's great to see San Jose State students take on this campaign."

But employers were not happy. "Most businesses would oppose such an increase in minimum wage, because obviously it just drives up the operating costs," said Matthew Mahood, president and CEO of the San Jose Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce. He also warned of unintended consequences: employers cutting jobs or leaving the city altogether.

A municipal minimum wage would have to be overseen by the city. It was too early to estimate the cost of that; the initiative does not provide funding for enforcement or education. Currently

the city has nine full-time employees who monitor and enforce just the living-wage and other requirements for city contractors, said Nina Grayson of the city's public works department.

In Myers-Lipton's class last year, as students looked at various social problems, a group including senior Saúl González ended up at the minimum wage. "People don't choose to be hungry, not to have a house or proper health care. They just don't have them because they can't afford it," said González, 30. The students found that Oregon, Washington and Nevada all set minimum wages higher than California's \$8.

Eventually, the students decided to try for a ballot initiative. They raised \$6,000 to commission a professional pollster, and volunteered as callers to test the waters for an initiative.

"An overwhelming majority of people supported this," said McCabe.

Myers-Lipton estimated that 80 percent of students in his sociology classes work at least 30 hours a week.

"In San Jose a lot of families are making minimum wage, working full time and not really providing for their

family," said Albert Perez, 23, who just graduated with a bachelor's degree in sociology. He knows well. When he was growing up in Pittsburg in Contra Costa County, his mother worked two jobs. "She was a great mother, but I hardly saw her. She would come home exhausted," Perez said.

Once San Jose's city attorney reviews the petition, the backers have 180 days to collect 19,161 valid signatures, or 5 percent of San Jose registered voters, City Clerk Dennis Hawkins said.

To get onto the November ballot, the petitioners need to deliver their signatures by early May, he said. The Santa Clara County Registrar of Voters will verify the signatures and validate the petition, then the City Council will decide whether to place the initiative on the November ballot.

Students are enthused about the fruit of their class's labor. "Eight dollars an hour is not enough to afford basic necessities to live," said McCabe. "You have to work one full day during the week just to pay for a full tank of gas in the car."

Boosting the minimum wage, she said, "is something we definitely need."

### HOURLY MINIMUM WAGES

Federal:	\$7.25
California:	\$8
Nevada:	\$7.25*/\$8.25**
Oregon:	\$8.80
Washington:	\$9.04
Santa Fe:	\$9.85
San Francisco:	\$10.24
Proposed San Jose Minimum Wage Ordinance:	\$10

\* for jobs providing health benefits  
 \*\* for jobs without health benefits