

Council takes hard look at living wage policy

Kim Guttormson

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Council has kept hopes for a living wage policy alive, voting to continue looking at whom it would apply to and what the financial impacts would be.

In a 8-7 vote, council recently approved a motion that will see city staff examine policy options and report back in January.

For those in favour of requiring a minimum salary equal to the low-income cutoff -- \$12 an hour with benefits, or \$13.25 without -- it's a step closer to doing the right thing.

"It's kept alive, it's moving forward," said Ald. John Mar. "It was just about should administration move forward and look at developing a policy -- and people were still kind of hysterical."

Aldermen opposed to the move wanted the proposed policy killed.

"I'm really disappointed with it. I don't think the common-sense citizens of Calgary appreciate a half-million-dollar raise for babysitters and skate park monitors," Ald. Joe Connelly said. "It's madness, as far as I'm concerned.

"Talk to any business person and they think it's a ridiculous idea."

The policy would apply to municipal employees and those who provide services to the city.

The City of Calgary has 682 positions that pay less than a living wage, almost all part-time or casual entry-level jobs, such as working at a concession stand, at a skate park or babysitting.

Raising those levels of pay would cost about \$200,000, plus another \$245,000 to adjust the closest pay grades.

But Connelly and others are also concerned that raising the level of pay for those employees will have repercussions throughout all pay grids, including union staff.

"This is about setting wage rates. We should not be setting wage rates," Ald. Ric McIver said. "We should be negotiating wage rates."

A number of aldermen expressed concern that the city was venturing into provincial territory by setting minimum wage levels. The provincially mandated minimum wage just rose to \$8.40 an hour.

"Yes, we are setting new standards," Ald. Brian Pincott said. "This should not be a race to the bottom."

Aldermen tried a number of unsuccessful amendments to the motion, including having the policy not apply to contractors or to workers under the age of 18.

At Ald. Gord Lowe's urging, council agreed to have administration report back with options.

Those opposed said the move is purely symbolic and no help those who most need it.

"I wish I could support it," Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said. "Probably their heart is in the right place.

"But it's the slippery slope standard. This is not something we should venture out in or muse about even for a moment."

kguttormson@theherald.canwest.com

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