

# Opinion: Vancouver city council shows leadership on living wages

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A Vancouver display demonstrates what a family should be able to afford a week in food in May 2011. Now, Vancouver city council is being applauded for adopting a living-wage policy. Wayne Leidenfrost/PNG files WAYNE LEIDENFROST / VANCOUVER SUN

Vancouver city council's vote to become a living-wage employer is good news. It recognizes the principle that full-time work should provide families with basic economic security. It's the amount needed for a family of four with two parents working full-time to pay for necessities, support the healthy development of their children, escape chronic financial stress and participate in their communities.

For 2016, the Metro Vancouver living wage is calculated at \$20.64 per hour, with each parent earning \$37,565 per year, working thirty-five hours each week.

The living-wage calculation covers basic food, rent, transportation, child care, other essentials and the occasional movie or dinner out. It does not cover owning a home, debt payments, savings for the future, security against serious emergencies or tough times.

The living wage is different than the minimum wage, which is set by provincial legislation. As of Sept. 15, 2016, B.C.'s minimum wage was raised from the lowest in Canada to the middle of the pack, now set at \$10.85, with a lower rate of \$9.60 for liquor servers.

There is a growing movement in B.C. and across North America for a \$15 minimum wage. This important legislative change would lift all full-time workers in B.C. out of poverty. It's also a stepping stone to the living wage as a higher standard.

In 2014, the three mayoral candidates for Vision, the NPA and COPE all committed to showing leadership on this issue if elected, and about a year ago city council unanimously approved taking action. The positive vote held Sept. 21 was the culmination of significant research and thoughtful consideration.

The cost to the city is modest. Most direct employees are already at a living wage, including most of those paid less than \$20.64, because the value of non-mandatory benefits such as medical coverage are also factored into the equation. For example, a wage of \$18.40 combined with \$2.24 worth of employer-paid health and welfare benefits, also adds up to a living wage. It's not a lot, but it's a baseline.

The decision does not bind other employers in Vancouver to increase wages; only changes to the minimum-wage laws can do that. But it does signal that everyone in this region deserves at least a living wage, and that Vancouver's mayor and councillors are prepared to show leadership on this standard for direct employees, and for the staff of contractors who provide services to the city as their renewals come due.

Phase 2 of the plan sets out steps toward bringing library, park board, fire, police and other indirect civic services into the policy as well.

The benefits of a living wage extend well beyond those who earn it. It's a simple truth that "we all do better when we all do better."

The 64 certified living-wage employers in Metro Vancouver note that employee retention, well-being and performance are all improved. In addition, the high societal costs of poverty are reduced, alleviating demands on health care and other social programs.

Rather than work two or even three jobs, parents are more able to spend meaningful time with their kids. They can also find time to contribute to their community as engaged citizens by participating in faith, recreational and volunteer activities.

Better-paid workers are also better able to spend earnings in local shops and businesses, resulting in economic stimulation and job growth. Through its Healthy City Strategy, the city has set itself ambitious poverty-reduction goals and the actions being taken to become a living-wage employer are an important part of getting there. The evidence is clear — we all benefit from a living wage and we applaud the City of Vancouver council for their bold and positive leadership on this issue.

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