



Regional councillors should back living-wage proposal

Soon after taxpayers and our temporary Regressive Conservative government provided billion-dollar welfare bailouts to overpaid incompetents running Big Business, we're now being told don't worry, be happy because the recession is over.

Too bad that's not the case for more than 28,000 unemployed people across Waterloo Region who, while Canadian banks report billion-dollar profits made during the recession, are still looking for jobs in order to keep their homes and, as their children head back to school, stay off welfare once employment-insurance benefits are exhausted.

As the economy slowly improves, I presume jobless people will have a better chance to find work. If and when they do, I hope, but very much doubt, new jobs will come complete with health benefits and pay the type of living wage that helps families keep their heads above the poverty line.

My doubts have to do with the fact the recession provided a made-to-measure opportunity for business to dump thousands of employees who once earned healthy salaries and enjoyed well-deserved benefits. As the job tide starts to turn, you can count on many of those new full-time positions being part-time or low-pay positions that offer few benefits.

That's why there should be more public interest and support for a proposal being studied to death by Waterloo Region councillors that would build a solid foundation for a living-wage program and make certain regional workers are paid enough to meet basic needs and stay out of poverty.

The proposal would mean employees and those who provide contracted services for the region would be guaranteed \$13.62 an hour instead of the miserly, unrealistic \$9.50 minimum wage.

Regional residents currently pay \$3.2 million a year to finance 600 contracts that include groundskeeping, cafeteria and janitorial services. About 150 of the contractors pay 200 workers less than \$13.62 an hour and it will cost regional taxpayers between \$644,500 and \$829,500 to upgrade those people to the living-wage rate.

If regional councillors ever find the courage of their anti-poverty convictions, the mainly symbolic plan proposed by anti-poverty activists could also mean any company that wants to do business with regional government would have to guarantee it pays workers at least \$13.62 an hour

Despite the sky-will-fall pain and dire financial agony predicted by hand-wringing business types and right-leaning critics, the living-wage proposal, which will have been studied for almost two years before a council decision is scheduled in 2010, has been successfully embraced and implemented by 140 U.S. cities and counties.

Closer to home, Hamilton, London and Ottawa are researching living-wage plans but, to date, no Canadian municipality has had the foresight to implement a program providing extra dollars that would immediately be spent in the community at local businesses.

Research shows municipalities and businesses supporting living-wage programs have seen less staff turnover, greater job satisfaction and higher productivity as well as cost savings on job retraining programs. Studies done in living-wage cities have also noted that, in addition to helping families escape poverty, extra cash has helped people upgrade their educations and participate more in community activities.

In addition to reducing the huge taxpayer cost of providing a variety of emergency food, shelter and social services for poor families, I'm convinced that by embracing a comprehensive living wage proposal, regional government would set a community example to local companies when the economy improves to the point they start to hire.

The next faltering step for the proposal takes place next Wednesday when a public meeting will be held to measure community support for a living-wage. The 6 p.m. meeting is at the regional administrative building at 150 Frederick St., Kitchener.

I hope those enjoying the benefits of this wealthy region who believe all levels of government share a responsibility to combat poverty attend the meeting and make their feelings known to butt-dragging councillors who are having so much difficulty supporting such a commendable living-wage proposal.

Kitchener journalist Frank Etherington writes about social issues on alternate Thursdays. He welcomes comments at fetherington@sympatico.ca