

Waterloo regional council's proposal to adopt a living wage to come under public scrutiny

BY FRANCES BARRICK, RECORD STAFF

A public meeting will be held next month to gauge community support for Waterloo regional council's proposal to adopt a living wage policy for people doing business with the region.

"This is just the next step along the way to see where the public is on the issue," said Regional Chair Ken Seiling.

The Sept. 16 meeting is at the regional administrative building at 150 Frederick St. in downtown Kitchener. It starts at 6 p.m.

Two years ago, Opportunities Waterloo Region, an anti-poverty group, asked council to consider implementing a living wage of \$13.62 an hour without benefits. This is higher than Ontario's minimum wage of \$9.50 an hour.

A living wage is the amount of money a single adult working full-time would need to live above the poverty line.

The region has been studying the concept for over a year. Public consultation is the last stage and a survey and meetings with special-interest groups have already been done. Results of the survey and meetings will be presented to council later this fall.

Seiling said initially there was some confusion surrounding living wage, as some people thought the region was setting a minimum wage businesses in the region must pay their employees. Only the provincial government has the authority to set minimum wage rates.

A living wage would only pertain to regional employees and people who do business with the region, such as contracted janitorial services.

Once that confusion was resolved, Seiling said the issue has not generated a lot of debate.

"It is not a hot topic," said Lynn Randall, regional director of social planning.

Art Sinclair, vice president of the Chamber of Commerce of Kitchener-Waterloo, said none of the chamber's 1,700 members have contacted him about the issue.

"I don't sense a huge level of opposition to it," Sinclair said.

While 140 American cities have some form of living-wage policies, no Canadian city has embraced it. Waterloo Region could be the first.

The City of Calgary initially adopted the concept at committee level, than city council reversed its decision.

The cities of Hamilton, London and Ottawa are now studying it.

And living wage could be a hard political sell here as four regional councillors voted against studying the issue.

At September's public meeting, council will present four options:

Do nothing or defer implementing a living-wage policy.

Adopt a living-wage policy for all non-student regional employees, and develop an education program encouraging other employers in the region to adopt a similar policy.

Give preference to bidders on regional contracts that pay a living wage to employees working at regional facilities.

Make it mandatory for contractors hired by the region to pay a living wage to employees working at regional facilities.

The region spends about \$3.2 million a year for about 600 contracts including janitorial, cafeteria and grounds-keeping services. About 150 contractors pay less than a living wage, a regional report said.

It would cost between \$644,500 and \$829,500 to pay about 200 employees, representing about 70 per cent of contracted service work, a living wage, the report said.

Proponents of a living wage argue that it benefits the region in less reliance on food hampers and social assistance.

Opponents say it could lead to layoffs as small businesses cannot absorb this wage increase.

Council is not expected to vote on whether to adopt a living-wage policy until early next year.

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