

Conference to focus on minimum wage issues in Galveston

By JOHN WAYNE FERGUSON | Posted: Monday, September 22, 2014 10:48 pm

GALVESTON — The national discussion about the issue of providing a living wage to low-income employees will take center stage at a conference on the island next week.

The micro-conference — it's only scheduled to last 90 minutes — will feature speakers from the city of Galveston, the Galveston Housing Authority, the University of Texas Medical Branch and the district attorney's office.

The speakers at the Gulf Coast Interfaith second annual Living Wage Conference will focus on topics including the demographics of the city's low-wage workers, the benefits and detriments of immigrant worker programs in the city and how law enforcement deals with cases of wage theft.

Steve McIntyre, a local attorney and board member for Gulf Coast Interfaith, the event's organizer, said that the conference is meant to prompt discussion and spread information about a topic that is growing in the public consciousness.

"The problem exists everywhere," McIntyre said of people making less money than it takes to support themselves and a family.

"As a general, cultural, community, societal, political concern, this is a legitimate discussion to be had, because people aren't making enough money."

Organizers had hoped to complete a study of the state of wages in Galveston by the time of the conference, McIntyre said, but are still gathering data.

When the study is complete, McIntyre said he hopes it will paint a clearer picture of just how many Galvestonians are living at or near poverty, despite having jobs.

"We're seeing who they are, how they're doing, if their numbers are going up or down, are things going to be better for their lives in the future," McIntyre said.

"We need to put some meat to the bone. We're going to have some hard information."

Living wage protests have been in the news recently. Earlier this month, thousands of fast food workers in major cities walked off the job and picketed their employers while demanding a \$15-per-hour wage.

The minimum wage in Texas is set to correspond at with the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour.

Texas cities are not allowed, under the law, to set their own minimum wages. That means that Galveston could not follow the lead of Seattle and set a minimum wage of \$15.

But there are other things that a city could do, McIntyre said, such as increasing the minimum wages for its own employees, or requiring that contractors hired by the city pay their employees a minimum amount.

It's possible that the city is open to such changes.

Last week, while making the final adjustments to the city's 2014-15 budget, the city council approved a 2 percent wage increase for city employees.

The week before, a similar increase was approved for the island's police and firefighters.

On a similar note, in August, island voters approved a tax increase that allowed the Galveston Independent School District to provide a 2 percent wage increase to its employees.

The council's push for higher wages was led by District 1 Councilman Tarris Woods, who up to the last moments of negotiation pushed for an even higher increase in employee wages.

The rest of the council demurred, with Mayor Jim Yarbrough saying he would prefer the city to conduct a wage study before taking any further actions.

Still, even without going into the details of the how, council members said they supported finding ways to improve wages for people who live and work in Galveston

"There's more than one way to get lower-paid employees money in their pocket," District 4 Councilman Norman Pappous said.

"We'll get the money where the money needs to go on the lower end of the scale."

At a glance

WHAT: Gulf Coast Interfaith second annual Living Wage Conference

WHEN: 6:30 p.m. Monday

WHERE: St. Patrick Catholic Church Auditorium, 1010 35th St., in Galveston