POINTS OF VIEW

Narrow Gosselin's bill to living wage

PHILIP POWER

Last November, voters in Detroit approved by a 4-1 margin a "living wage ordinance."

The measure requires all companies doing more than $50,000 in business with the city or getting that much in tax breaks to pay their employees at a rate of 125 percent of the federal poverty level. As of now, that comes to $8.23 per hour if workers get benefits or $10.29 if they don't. (The current national minimum wage is $5.15 per hour.)

Political wisdom at the time was that organized labor slipped the measure onto the ballot while Mayor Dennis Archer wasn't paying attention. Given the highly unionized electorate in the city, getting an ordinance entitled "living wage" onto the ballot was all it took.

Not surprisingly, business leaders went ballistic. They were joined by some Democrats who worried about the anti-growth consequences of local voters legislating wage levels. Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara, for example, called the ordinance "diabolical" and "the greatest deterrent to economic development that's out there."

Gov. John Engler and House Speaker Chuck Perricone agreed. And, surprise, state Rep. Robert Gosselin, a conservative Republican from Troy, duly introduced HB 4777, which he called "The Job Creation and Regulatory Responsibility Act."

The bill – also called the "Destruction of Local Government Act" by opponents, some from organized labor and some local officials – would block local government units from setting policy in areas already addressed by state government. Because there are a bunch of state and federal laws already on the books dealing with minimum wages, HB 4777 would effectively nullify attempts by cities to dictate wages.

There's no doubt about it, living wage measures are popular with the voters. In Michigan, efforts are already under way to get similar measures on the ballot in Ypsilanti and Ypsilanti Township, and liberals in Ann Arbor, Kalamazoo and Lansing are beginning to beat the drums. The movement has a national dimension, too, with a bunch of communities including Baltimore, Boston and San Jose already adopting similar ordinances.

Although the debate over the bill looks on the surface like state versus local control, in actual fact it's about economics and the workings of the free market system.

Supporters of living wage measures argue morality, saying it's just not fair for employers in a given city to be allowed to pay workers less than the poverty level for raising a family. Opponents ask how economic development and job creation can possibly be encouraged when countless local governments are ceaselessly interfering with the workings of the labor market.

Aside from the ideology involved, I think there are compelling practical reasons to eliminate living wage ordinances.

First, pandering. Once you let one living wage ordinance onto the books, local politicians will find themselves falling over each other to set higher and higher required wage levels.

Second, migration. Manufacturing companies have for years migrated their plants out of state to find lower wage levels in Alabama or Mexico. Imagine what would happen if gas stations, party stores or dry cleaners started moving their businesses from community to community in response to varying living wage levels.

Mike Malott, the head of the statewide news service used by this newspaper, points out an interesting parallel to the living wage argument: tax abatements. In the 1970s and '80s, Malott writes, politicians got the bright idea that giving businesses 50 percent property tax breaks for 12 years was a neat way to lure new business and compete with other states. But smart business people started shopping for the best deal, pitting state against state and community against community.

The quarrel now going on between Troy and Warren over tax breaks for General Motors will look like a polite conversation in Sunday school if living wage ordinances are enacted in all manner of Michigan communities and bidding wars erupt between local politicians pandering for votes and between communities trying to attract jobs and economic development.

Local government officials who worry that Gosselin's bill would destroy home rule would be well advised to work with him to narrow the bill down just to living wage issues.

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All of us belong here

HUGH GALLAGHER

Let's have coffee. Let's get together and talk things over.

This is the beginning of understanding. This is where hostility can change into tolerance.

We've come a long way over the last several years in our ongoing struggle to overcome the racial and cultural divide that has so long defined the Detroit metro area.

Last week I had the pleasure of attending a forum presented by the Multicultural/Multiracial Commission of Farmington/Farmington Hills and sponsored by the Farmington PTA Council, The Farmington Observer and Northwest Gazette.

Here a group of good people gathered to discuss how we should live in a multi-racial and multi-cultural environment. The basic message is always the same, the golden rule around which most religious and ethical systems are built – treat others as you'd want them to treat you.

Hiram Harris, an African-American parent, was a member of the panel. He admitted that he was there because "they asked me." And, that, he added, is the key. Go out and invite all members of the community to participate, to feel welcome, to feel valued.

A member of the audience asked how she should approach neighbors who didn't speak English and seemed to stay secluded. Many other audience members offered numerous suggestions. You don't need to speak another language to communicate with another human being. As someone said, "A smile means just about the same thing to everyone."

Irene Kernicky represented the Council of Homeowners Association and spoke eloquently of being an immigrant herself from Scotland and discovering in America a land where people were more open and more tolerant.

She said, "Homeowners associations do a lot to bring people together."

Anyone who knows the sorry history of metro Detroit knows that homeowners associations, along with real estate agencies, insurance companies and, yes, newspapers, were often the leaders in intolerance and division. In my lifetime I have strong memories of white only and colored only real estate ads, racial steering, block busting, insurance red lining and restrictive covenants.

But we've turned a wide corner in places like Farmington and Farmington Hills. Now homeowners associations take the lead in promoting tolerance, communication and "bringing people together."

Still the forum is an indication that we also have a long way to go. We need to provide that honest, direct invitation that got Hiram Harris to the panel table. We need to have bilingual programs that help us communicate with recent immigrants who are struggling both to be a part of America and to preserve their own cultural identity. It's a struggle that every ethnic group has fought in this nation of immigrants.

The forum was a start, a program for those already committed to the process of toleration. More needs to be done to reach out to those who haven't gotten the message yet: "This is a big country and we all belong."

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