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## Divided views regarding minimum wage amendment



Photo by Emily Clingman

**Santiago's manager Erick Longoria (right), pictured here with waitresses Trisha Aguilar (left) and Candice Mata, and others are weighing the pros and cons of how a proposed minimum wage increase on November's ballot would affect business and their ability to hire.**

By Emily Clingman/*The Johnstown Breeze*

This November, Colorado voters will decide if the state's minimum wage should be increased or stay at the current \$8.31 an hour.

Amendment 70, also known as The \$12 Minimum Wage Amendment, proposes to incrementally raise minimum wage each year to \$12 per hour by 2020.

Locally, members of the community are divided about it.

John Soricelli, executive director of the Johnstown-Milliken Chamber of Commerce, would prefer to see the decision made by business owners.

"Small business is the backbone of this country economically," Soricelli said. "Minimum wage should be left to free market economics, dictated by skills that people have, as well as supply and demand of labor. Have that determine more of what wages will be at any certain time."

Proponents argue that workers need increased wages to keep up with the cost of living. In August, Colorado Public Radio reported that housing costs in the state have increased 50 percent in the last five years. Those in favor of the increase say a higher minimum wage will grow the state's economy.

"I certainly see all sides," Soricelli said. "The desire for a free market, having to let employees go because they can't afford them, people just trying to get by with the rising cost of living."

He said the Chamber is an available resource for people to turn to for business help, especially learning to be more efficient.

Jeff Tori, owner of 21st Century Painting and Maintenance in Johnstown, said the idea of raising the minimum wage is a slippery slope. There are pros and cons.

"I always want to see my employees do better and make more money," Tori said. "That's the goal when they hire in."

Someone who knows little about painting can get to \$11 or \$12 quickly, according to Tori, but they have to show merit.

"To jump in at \$12 would be tough because of turnover. I'd be paying a lot of people that are going to move on," he said. "For me, that part would be difficult."

Tori predicts the cost of his services would have to increase by 20 percent and he would have to let people go if there was a mandated increase in minimum wage.

"I'd just have to try to do the same amount of work with less people," he said.

"Minimum wage should not be a living wage," said Carrie Mercer, owner of The Cracked Egg in Milliken. "Kids start out to gain experience, then they move up, like we did when we were young. Any kid that has any kind of talent that works for me makes well above minimum wage though."

The problem, said Mercer, with having to pay inexperienced people at a higher wage, "a wage that they are not worth," is that she would have to hire two of those people to get the same job done, taking away from the experienced person.

"If you only have a hundred dollars in the bucket, it's really a distribution thing," Mercer said. "I understand why they do it for large corporations like Walmart or whatever, but this is America, if you don't like your job at Walmart, quit." Mercer believes there are plenty of jobs.

"I find young people just feel entitled," she said. "They think they should just show up and get paid, but they actually have to do something. I mean, I feel horrible for the younger generation. They start out life thinking it's going to be so easy, and nobody taught them it's not."

Mercer said her kitchen staff won't be affected by a minimum wage hike; it will be the waitresses. The 2016 Colorado tipped minimum wage is \$5.29 per hour currently. If a server doesn't make up the remaining \$3.02 in tips, the employer is responsible to make that up. If Amendment 70 passes, the tipped wage would increase in three years to \$8.98 – a 70 percent increase.

"We will see their jobs replaced by kiosks at the tables," Mercer said. "You see it already."

Teens in the area have opinions too. Chance Trujillo, a Roosevelt High School junior, is good with the minimum wage where it's at.

"The higher up you go, the more you get paid," Trujillo said. "I get it."

Regarding the accusations from adults about being entitled: "Oh yeah, I can sometimes agree with that," Trujillo said.

Brendan Haberl, a sophomore at Roosevelt, has a job as a busser at Rollin' Smoke BBQ in Milliken. He makes \$8.34 an hour. He doesn't believe he deserves \$12 an hour for what he's doing.

"That's the perfect amount for starting out at," he said.

Erick Longoria, manager at Santiago's, said it would be nice for employees for sure, but if he were a business owner, it would depend on how the business is doing.

"Because Santiago's is a corporate franchise, we just can't raise the prices whenever we want to," Longoria said. "So, if minimum wage was raised in Colorado, that could be a problem for us."

Adam Carmen, a Milliken resident who works in Englewood, thinks a minimum wage increase would be bad for everyone. Even though he makes twice as much as the state's minimum wage currently, he predicts, "Everything will go up in price like five percent."

Russell Hays of Hays Market believes a minimum wage increase would greatly affect his business.

"We would have to cut back on employees," Hays said. "In the long run, it would hurt any business with customer service, meaning less employees available to provide good service."

Hays would like to see a bracketed minimum wage by age group.

"If I could pay my teens working their first job less than say, a 30-year-old employee with lots of experience, then it would even out," he said. "It's their first job, they have to start somewhere. But, if everyone has to start out at a higher minimum wage, I will be forced to hire less people, the ones who have more experience. There will be no buffer zone to bring the kids in and train them."

On the other hand, Steven Hardy, shift manager at McDonalds in Johnstown, believes a wage increase would be really helpful not only to employees' wallets but in recruiting and retaining employees at the restaurant.

"We start employees out at \$9 to \$9.50 an hour already to make it appealing to apply for a job here," Hardy said. "Imagine if we could offer twelve."

Hardy doesn't think a minimum wage increase will drive up prices of other goods and services.

"It's a small town. Prices are pretty much set," he said. "That's just my opinion though."

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