

Guest Columns

NM needs minimum wage hike

By Sen. Clemente Sanchez / Grants Democrat, Chairman of Senate Corporations Committee

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New Mexico faces numerous economic challenges today that require determined action by the Legislature and the governor: lack of jobs, high rates of childhood poverty and an exodus from our state of young and better-educated residents in search of brighter pay and career prospects in surrounding states.

One important step we can take now is to enact a statewide minimum wage increase of \$9 per hour from the current \$7.50. This is a modest increase that is long overdue, and it enjoys the backing of business groups and organized labor alike. I am proud of my colleagues in the Senate who voted for \$9 last week with strong bipartisan support.

New Mexico already suffers from some of the lowest median wages in the country. The lowest-paid workers here have not had a pay raise in years. The truth is that working people really need a livable wage, but we can enact a modest pay raise for minimum-wage workers right now. They have waited long enough.

Full-time work year-round at the state-wide minimum wage of \$7.50 per hour leaves an adult with two children earning thousands of dollars below the poverty line. Who thinks that it is right that residents working full-time should live in poverty?

The real value of New Mexico's current \$7.50 minimum wage, set in 2009, has been eroded substantially by the ever-rising costs of housing, food and clothing in the intervening years. Raising the minimum wage to \$9 an hour now would give thousands of families a lift they surely need.

Contrary to the claims of opponents, raising the minimum wage is good for the economy. More than 600 economists have affirmed that increasing the minimum wage has little or no negative effect on the employment of minimum-wage workers. A minimum-wage increase will help stimulate the economy and job creation since low-wage workers will have more earnings to spend.

This is not a Democratic or Republican issue. People across the political spectrum support an increase in New Mexico's minimum wage, as was witnessed in Senate committees where the legislation was debated, and on the floor of the Senate itself.

We won't be out of step with surrounding states if we increase to \$9. Both Arizona and Colorado are raising their minimum wage to \$12 per hour. If they can do that, New Mexico certainly can do \$9.

Raising the minimum wage is a responsible policy. It is supported by ample research, and its broad support is reflected in polls of residents of our state. We should think of the people in communities across New Mexico who work for minimum wage every day, and who struggle to make ends meet and provide a decent life for their children.

If legislation for a \$9 minimum wage progresses through the House of Representative and to the governor's desk, New Mexico respectfully asks that she sign it into law. It is the right thing to do.