

Speakers call for raising Idaho's minimum wage

Ringo: Someone working a full-time low-pay job with a child is living below the poverty line

Terri Harber/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

Idaho's minimum wage was discussed by two speakers well versed in how the rate of \$7.25 an hour and the tipped minimum wage of \$3.35 an hour affects the state's residents and economy during Wednesday's meeting of the League of Women Voters of Moscow.

The speakers, Shirley Ringo, who retired from the state Legislature in 2014 after 14 years of service in the House, and Judith Brown, an economist, business manager and AmeriCorps program director at Palouse Clearwater Environmental Institute, opened by saying they want to see the current amount increased significantly. Idaho is one of 14 states that doesn't require any additional pay above the federal minimum wage.

Ringo talked about how several years ago an attempt in the state Legislature to raise the minimum wage to \$6.15 an hour from \$5.15, where it had been for almost a decade by that point, was thwarted quickly. An index for future increases was also proposed.

The committee chairman, however, "was told by leadership not to introduce the bill," Ringo said.

The Democrats, with their smaller numbers in the House, had no influence in the matter, she said.

While campaigning for elected office, Ringo said she visited a large number of residents and saw how some of the poorest people she represented lived.

Decent pay "is simply humane," she said. Someone working a full-time minimum wage job with a child is living below the poverty line, she said.

Ringo used information from the U.S. Department of Labor to describe, then debunk, misconceptions people have about raising the minimum wage. For example, she said, the opinion that raising the minimum wage will only affect teenagers is incorrect because 89 percent of those who would benefit from a federal minimum wage increase to \$12 per hour are age 20 or older, and 56 percent are women.

Others resistant to the idea say it lacks public support, though "I don't even think that's true in Idaho," she said.

Polls conducted since February 2013, when President Obama first asked Congress to increase the minimum wage, show an overwhelming majority of Americans support an increase, according to the federal government website www.dol.gov/minwage/mythbuster.htm.

She also pointed out workers paid low wages end up needing a variety of government services to make ends meet and that "we're really subsidizing these businesses."

Brown then explained how the worth of the minimum wage has declined by about 30 percent since 1968, when President Lyndon Johnson was in office.

"Raising it was an important part of his war on poverty," Brown said.

Now, she said, the middle class isn't doing very well, either.

She also pointed out that throughout the past 40 years workers' hourly compensation has gone up only 9.2 percent but productivity has risen 74.4 percent. From 1948 to 1973, wages and productivity were at about 91 percent and nearly 97 percent, respectively, she said.

"Wage is supposed to reflect productivity, but the gap has been widening since 1973," she said.

Terri Harber can be reached at (208) 883-4631, or by email to tharber@news.com.