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Living wage has a lot to do with morality

BYLINE: David Hunter

On Tuesday, Dec. 10, the Knoxville City Council will vote on a measure with huge moral implications. It is not getting a lot of attention because the individuals who would benefit most have very little voice in the community.

At issue will be the question of whether the council members believe all employees of the city should be paid enough to bring them up to the federal poverty level of \$19,000 a year for a family of four. According to local proponents of the raise, the number of employees who would be affected is less than 100, and the annual cost to the city would be approximately \$83,000. In a budget approaching \$200 million, the raise would be almost statistically insignificant. The money needed to fund the increase is less than 20 percent of the \$500,000 grant recently given to the contractor renovating the old federal courthouse. So funding will probably not be the central issue when the Knoxville City Council votes on whether to make the funds available.

If the council members decide against providing enough money to bring those few city employees up to the federal level poverty level of \$19,000 for a family of two parents and two children, it will almost certainly be a matter of turf control.

There are always those at the top of every organization who view what they see as outside interference - no matter how slight - as intolerable. It is as if they fear that any decision involving input from third parties might lead to anarchy in the streets or an avalanche of decisions based on moral issues, not dollars and cents.

Those promoting a living wage for all Knoxville city employees are, for the most part, concerned members of the community. On Nov. 26, a letter signed by 65 local religious leaders - liberal and conservative, Christian and Jewish - calling themselves People of Faith for a Living Wage, was released to the media and made available to city officials. The letter asked the City Council to fund the raise.

Being people of faith, the authors of the letter quoted the prophet Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." We in America generally think of justice as a matter of criminal law, but it isn't just that; it also means simple fairness and ethical treatment for our fellow human beings. And you need not go to the Bible to find the concept. It is embedded in the American ideal, and we repeat it every time we say, "with liberty and justice for all."

In a recent study called "The **Self-**

Sufficiency Standard for Tennessee," the Tennessee Alliance for Progress, a statewide coalition of community leaders, determined that the bare minimum income for a family of four to live without subsidies in the city of Knoxville is \$31,848.

It is a certainty that all of the problems of the world and not even all the problems in the city of Knoxville can be solved with one small raise to fewer than 100 city employees. The principle involved, however, is a giant step in the right direction, morally speaking. Our government, local and national, reflects our values as a society.

The employees at the bottom of the Knoxville city pay scale have no political clout like the police and firefighters and members of the City Employees League. They are people who do some of the most demanding but essential work. Somebody has to clean the ditches, keep the storm drains open and shovel sand and salt off the back of trucks in the bitter cold after a snowstorm.

As we approach the Christmas season and the members of the Knoxville City Council consider whether to provide the additional funding so that Mayor Victor Ashe can implement the raise, I would put another thought in their minds. It is a paraphrase of something once said by a Jewish carpenter turned rabbi: "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me."

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