

Bancroft on fence for \$15 wage

By Sarah Sobanski

Last week's announcement that the provincial Liberal government will be increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2019 was met with mixed reaction in Bancroft.

An informal poll conducted on the paper's website showed Bancroftians are split on whether the increase is a good idea. By June 5, just over 54 per cent who voted over the week were in favour of the increase. Around 46 per cent were against it.

The province has proposed raising minimum wage from \$11.40 to \$14 by January 1, 2018 and \$15 by the same day in 2019. The increase is just one change in a list of labour legislation proposals detailed in the Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act, 2017. It also proposes part-time and full-time workers paid the same hourly wage for the same job, paid sick days for every worker and increasing employment law enforcement.

Today, a single person working 35 hours a week at minimum wage could still qualify for social assistance through the Ontario Works program. At \$15 an hour, he or she would be able to exit the program.

"They wouldn't qualify at all," said director of community and human services for the county Erin Rivers. "That's a liveable income. That means that you have enough to live on that's above the rates for social assistance."

MPP Todd Smith said he's worried about small businesses, people losing their jobs and the small time frame in which the province expects the increase to happen.

"This is a 24 per cent increase to the minimum by January 1 of next year, six months from now. That's a huge hit for small business owners, and then 35 per cent by January 1 of 2019," said Smith. "I worry about people losing their jobs. I worry about their jobs becoming redundant because in some cases, and we're seeing it happen now, people are being replaced by computers and machines. I think that should be a concern for everyone out there, especially our young people."

In its release, the province said it would work with businesses and support them as the labour legislation comes into effect. It also suggested businesses would see an increase in productivity, employee retention and "boost the purchasing power of workers" when they raised their wages.

Program co-ordinator for North Hastings Community Trust Jane Kali suggested all levels of government need to work together to address the challenges to local businesses "especially with recent utilities increases. She also noted, however, that the current minimum wage just isn't high enough.

"Millions of people in Ontario are trying to survive and support families on a wage that does not cover ever-increasing housing and food costs. Locally, we know that there are few jobs that pay a liveable wage, so most people in our community juggle minimum wage, seasonal employment and never have enough to take care of themselves and their families," said Kali. "This can have devastating effects on an entire community as we are seeing here locally with increased numbers at our local food bank and more and more people unable to pay their bills."

Rivers noted that the increase still didn't help those living in poverty without jobs.

"I don't think it's a silver bullet for poverty though because it really doesn't address the people living in poverty without jobs or the people who are only able to find part-time jobs or those dealing with the challenges of an illness or disability," she said.