

**Memo Submitting Living Wage Update Legislation**  
**August 20, 2025**  
**Study Session**

**To: City Council**

**From: Mayor Alan Webber**

**Re: Proposal for Revising Current Living Wage Law**

---

Purpose and Summary

Santa Fe's future depends on many factors—none more important than the adoption of a strategy that helps guide the composition of the city: who lives here now and in the future. Much of the unique character of Santa Fe is a reflection of the makeup of our community. Santa Fe has always been a diverse place, with some families tracing their roots back for many generations and others proud to be new arrivals. The city depends on workers in a variety of jobs and industries whose labors make the economy go; it also has retirees who contribute their time as volunteers and their support to worthy causes. Keeping that blend of people—a population strategy for Santa Fe—will play a critical role in the city's future, its character, its distinctive culture, its quality of life, and its sense of place and livability.

A population strategy has many components, but none is more important than the combination of affordable housing and a living wage.

As this memo lays out, there is a gap between what it costs to live in Santa Fe and what people who work in Santa Fe are paid. The living wage ordinance, adopted in 2002 with a limited scope and amended soon after in 2003, displayed foresight and courage in addressing what was already seen as a gap back then. In the last 23 years, the gap has grown wider, forcing more working Santa Feans to leave the city where they work and have roots, and relocate to less expensive communities. There are numerous negative consequences—economic, social, and more—of allowing that long-standing trend to continue, not the least of which are the losses of diversity and community continuity in Santa Fe.

Data suggest that City policies on the supply side have had some impact on the cost of rental units in Santa Fe. More production, particularly of multi-family rental units, will continue to impact rental costs. The next step is to make an adjustment to the living wage.

This proposal increases it to \$17.50/hour after a one-year period for preparation and observation. It maintains the existing provisions for exceptions. It creates a new blended formula for calculating any annual increase, using both the Consumer Price Index and Fair Market Rent data specific to Santa Fe, a reflection of the key role that housing costs play in what constitutes a living wage. It caps any increase at 5%, guarding against an excessive increase, and establishes a floor of 0% preventing the living wage from going down in the case of an economic crisis.

This two-pronged strategy represents another commitment of the City to address the needs of both employees and employers and puts the City on record as supporting a strategy that will keep Santa Fe, Santa Fe when it comes to the people who live and work in the city.

To recap:

Santa Fe's future as a diverse community where people can both work and live depends in large measure on two inter-related factors: the supply of housing units and the income level of the working people of Santa Fe. A strategy that focuses on the population composition of the city needs to address both factors.

The pipeline of housing construction in Santa Fe is currently experiencing a renewed level of activity. As a result, rental rates are finally experiencing a modest but significant improvement through the increased supply and diversity of housing options. More housing construction, additional funding for the Affordable Housing Trust Fund, and other supply side housing policies can continue this positive trend.

However, the gap between the cost of housing and the income levels of Santa Fe's workforce is still substantial. As a result, data show that long-time Santa Fe residents are forced to relocate to less expensive communities outside the city, and then commute to jobs in the city.

The second part of an effective strategy comes through an adjustment to the living wage, as recommended initially by the Food Depot in a white paper on childhood hunger. This proposal does the following things:

- If adopted, would go into effect one year after its adoption. This is to permit the Governing Body, as well as employers and employees, to take stock of the larger macro-economic environment, which currently is undergoing a great deal of uncertainty. A year from now there should be much more clarity as to the strength and direction of both the national economy and the local Santa Fe economy.

- Leaves in place the current provisions in the existing living wage ordinance concerning exemptions for tipped wages, and several special categories of employers.

-Makes a one-time change to the living wage to \$17.50/hour.

-Adjusts the basis for the annual escalator so that the formula is a 50-50 calculation of the Western Region Consumer Price Index (for the previous year) and the HUD Fair Market Rent for a 2-bedroom unit in Santa Fe. The purpose is to tie the escalator more closely to the cost of housing, which is the most significant affordability factor for workers. The annual increase would be capped at no more than 5% per year and the floor would be 0% in the event of a depression or economic crisis.

## **Background**

### Initial Ordinance

In 2002, the City of Santa Fe enacted a Living wage ordinance. The ordinance as amended in 2003 applies to most full-time public, private, or non-profit employees within the city limits. The purpose of the legislation was to require employers to pay employees minimum wages adequate to meet the basic needs of living in Santa Fe. Santa Fe was widely recognized as the second city in the nation to adopt a living wage law.

At that time, the Governing Body recognized that many Santa Fe workers earned wages that were insufficient to support themselves and their families. The purpose of the living wage was tied to the public welfare, health, safety, and prosperity of Santa Fe; earned wages needed to be sufficient to ensure a decent and healthy life for workers and their families.

The findings included the fact that, in 2003, Santa Fe County was 23% below the national average in average earnings and that the cost of living was 18% higher than the national average. Furthermore, housing costs were much higher than in most parts of New Mexico, and low-income workers were required to spend a disproportionate percentage of their income sheltering themselves and their families.

The Governing Body further stated that a living wage would benefit employers and the economy by improving employee performance, reducing employee turnover, and lowering absenteeism on the job. As a result, productivity would improve, as would the quality of services provided by employees.

Beginning January 1, 2004, the minimum wage was set at \$8.50 per hour. Then on January 1, 2006, it was increased to \$9.50/hour. Beginning January 1, 2009, and each year thereafter, the minimum wage has been adjusted upward by an amount corresponding to the previous year's increase, if any, in the Consumer Price Index for the Western region for urban wage

earners and clerical workers. In 2003, it was estimated that for a worker in Santa Fe to afford an average rent, that worker would have needed to make \$15.29 an hour.

Under the provisions of the living wage ordinance, tips earned by workers who typically earn more than \$100/month in tips or commissions are counted toward the living wage standard. Nonprofit organizations whose primary source of funds is from Medicaid are exempted. The value of health care and/or childcare benefits is included in the calculation of wages paid to employees.

The City Manager or his/her designee is authorized to enforce the living wage law. Anyone found guilty of violating the law may be charged with a misdemeanor. The City and any individual aggrieved by such a violation may also bring a civil action to remedy the violation and, upon prevailing, be entitled to legal or equitable relief. The living wage ordinance includes prohibitions against retaliation and circumvention.

A study performed by Aaron Yelowitz, entitled “Santa Fe’s Living wage Ordinance and the Labor Market” published by the Employment Policies Institute in September 2005 claimed that the Santa Fe living wage was responsible for a 9% increase in the unemployment rate of Santa Fe’s least educated workers.

However, when the study was peer reviewed by Jeannette Wicks-Lim and Robert Pollin of the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, they found the Yelowitz study to be misleading and incomplete, based on a misuse of available data. When the peer reviewers re-ran the Yelowitz model using the same data, they found that the living wage ordinance did not produce any decline at all in job availability. On the other hand, the ordinance did increase the earned income of the average worker covered by the ordinance. Thus, the ordinance did improve the income of low-wage workers without sacrificing their employment opportunities.

#### Where It Stands Today

Santa Fe’s living wage increased to \$15/hour on March 1, 2025. The New Mexico State minimum wage is \$12/hour. The federal minimum wage has remained at \$7.25/hour since 2009.

Although Santa Fe was one of the early leaders in setting a living wage ordinance, many cities have since surpassed it including Seattle, Denver, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Jose, Washington. D. C., New York City, Chicago. and Boston. In these cities, the living wage ranges from \$16/hour to more than \$23/hour. Enforcement of the living wage ordinance in Santa Fe has not posed a problem to date.

In 2022, the Food Depot issued a report on food scarcity in Santa Fe. Specifically, the group had been charged with coming up with recommendations to make sure that no children in Santa Fe would go to bed hungry. Their report offered a number of recommendations, but the central proposal was that the City needed to increase the living wage.

Since that report was delivered, there have been several efforts, both formal and informal, to come up with a proposal that would respond to the Food Depot's focus on updating the living wage. Most recently, this spring and summer, Mayor Webber has held exploratory discussions with a number of groups, businesses, non-profits, and associations to discuss possible proposals to update the Santa Fe living wage. Meetings included representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, Chainbreakers Collective, AFSCME, the hospitality industry, the construction industry, Christus St. Vincent Hospital, and the Food Depot, among others. Several meetings were held with different representatives of the hospitality industry, which employs 17.6% of the workers in Santa Fe, and account for nearly 11,000 jobs. The purpose of these discussions was to discuss whether the living wage was achieving its initial goals, and, if not, how it could be adjusted to do a better job, without causing economic harm to the city's employers or its economy.

Several shared findings emerged from those discussions. First, most representatives agreed that the current impact of the \$15/hour living wage is limited. Many employers are already paying more than the living wage for entry level workers and have been doing so for some time. For example, data from the hospitality industry in 2022 indicated that average wages for hotel reservations agents were \$19/hour, lead cooks \$18/hour, line cooks \$16/hour, food/beverage supervisors \$17/hour, employee cafeteria cooks \$16/hour, laundry attendants \$15.50/hour, and retail clerks \$16.25/hour.

A second widely shared comment was that the overall U.S. economy is currently experiencing wide-spread uncertainty. While Santa Fe's economy is steady and strong, economic and trade policies coming out of Washington, D.C. have business leaders concerned that decision-making with regard to their companies is increasingly challenging. Until the macro-economic environment becomes clearer, it is difficult for them to make informed decisions about their business plans.

#### Nexus Between Living Wages and Housing Costs

Housing costs are the single largest cost burden for low-wage workers in Santa Fe. Over the past 25 years, Santa Fe Market Rent (FMR) levels have consistently trended upward faster than general inflation in the Western United States. While efficiency units have seen the highest annual average increase at 4.7%, a two-bedroom unit (the most widely used

benchmark for housing affordability) has increased at an average of 3.4% per year. The average regional Consumer Price Index (CPI-W) has increased 2.7% annually since 2000.

This suggests that, on average, housing costs in Santa Fe have typically grown 0.7% faster than inflation. Between 2023 and 2024, two-bedroom rents surged by 22.9%, far outpacing the CPI-W increase of just 2.8%. Median incomes in the city have risen 36% since 2016; rents have increased 74%, and home prices by 80% according to housing data from the Santa Fe Forward general plan assessment.

While there are some outliers, such as 2012 and 2016, two years in which Santa Fe experienced rent declines, the data show that indexing the living wage solely to the CPI-W underestimates the actual cost pressures faced by renters in Santa Fe.

One of the consequences of high rental costs in Santa Fe is the displacement of workers to more affordable communities. Simply put, people who work in Santa Fe cannot afford to live in Santa Fe. More than one-third of those employed in Santa Fe live outside the county in more affordable areas, such as Rio Rancho and Espanola, and commute to Santa Fe. According to Zillow, the average rent in Santa Fe is approximately \$2,114 per month for a two-bedroom apartment. The H.U.D. definition of being rent burdened is spending more than 30% of gross income on housing. By this definition, one-third of all households in Santa Fe are rent burdened, especially those working in the hospitality, education, and social service professions. Even households with two incomes cannot afford to buy the average single-family home in Santa Fe.

Using the 30% guideline, a worker in Santa Fe would need to earn on the order of \$25-30/hour in full-time, year-round employment to afford these rents. An analysis by the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that the wages necessary to afford a modest rental are roughly \$25.33/hour for a one-bedroom and \$29.52/hour for a two-bedroom unit.

The gold standard for living wage calculations is the M.I.T. Living Wage Calculator. It indicates the hourly rate that an individual in a household must earn to support themselves and/or their family working full time or 2,080 hours per year. In Santa Fe, the M.I.T. living wage calculator calls for \$24.42/hour for a family with no children, \$43.67/hour for a family with one child, \$56.30/hour for a family with two children, and \$72.66/ hour for a family with 3 children.

### Housing Supply and Demand

Clearly, Santa Fe cannot realistically expect to close the gap between what entry-level wage earners make and what is needed for reasonable housing costs strictly through raising the living wage. That would pose an extreme hardship on businesses in Santa Fe that contribute

the most to the community and would lead to layoffs and unemployment. However, increasing the living wage and adding to the city's housing stock, when combined as a two-pronged strategy, can begin to narrow the gap between what people can afford and what the housing market has to offer. Supply and demand in the housing market does play a critical role in making it more possible for Santa Fe to retain its diverse population and make it affordable for those who work in Santa Fe to live in Santa Fe.

According to a 2025 study included in the Santa Fe Forward general plan assessment, the city is projected to need 3,270 new housing units by 2050 to meet expected population growth, including 1,309 rental units and 1,961 ownership units. This is approximately 133 units per year needed just to keep up with new housing demand. Most of this demand will occur before 2040; it does not take into account the current housing shortfall.

Santa Fe Forward finds that the majority of Santa Fe's lower and moderate-income households (those earning less than the median income of \$70,000) are priced out of most home ownership opportunities in the city. There is also a deficit in rental units to serve the number of low-income households in Santa Fe; notably, as a result recent housing construction trends have favored rental apartments rather than single-family homes.

Housing production in Santa Fe decreased after the 2008 recession but has since rebounded. There has been a dramatic uptick in multifamily construction in recent years, with 407 to 840 units per year permitted since 2018, partially due to regulatory changes to the Santa Fe Homes Program which improved development feasibility and offered developers additional ways to meet the inclusionary zoning requirements.

The city is currently experiencing an increase in housing development. Tierra Contenta Phase 3 and the housing development called for in the Midtown Master Plan will account for several thousand new units in those two areas alone. In addition, there are several large multi-family projects of over 300 units currently under construction. Altogether, there are more than 2,500 multifamily units currently under construction and nearly 4,000 more multi-family units in the pipeline, as well as several hundred single family units.

The significant influx of new apartments in the past few years has slowed rent increases. For example, data show that early 2025 rents have risen only about ½% above rents from a year ago. At this pace, rent growth will likely remain limited for several years as new units are completed and occupied. This is a positive trend for rent affordability.

However, while it may indicate a slow-down in the rate at which rents increase, it does not reduce the still sizable gap between what people bring home in their paychecks, and how much they have to spend on housing. That fundamental problem awaits another positive measure, this time adjusting the living wage.

### New Housing Affordability

The supply of housing of all types has been and must be a part of any solution designed to help those who work in the city to live in the city. On the supply side, the City has implemented a variety of housing policies to increase the affordability of the new housing units for low-middle income workers. These include:

-The Governing Body proposed, and Santa Fe voters overwhelmingly approved a 3% excise tax on the sale of homes over \$1 million, with the proceeds going into the City's Affordable Housing Trust Fund. That provision, which, according to some estimates could yield \$7 million per year in new support for affordable housing, is currently being litigated in the New Mexico Courts of Appeals.

- Inclusionary zoning in the Santa Fe Homes program, requires housing developments of more 10 units to provide a percentage of affordable homes in exchange for density bonuses and fee reductions.

-The Governing Body has allocated \$3 million per year for the Affordable Housing Trust Fund to provide support a variety of programs aimed at addressing the housing needs of low-income residents.

-Developers can benefit from a variety of incentives for building affordable units, including fee waivers in some cases. The city provides water rights to developers building affordable units, another valuable incentive.

-The City uses Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to fund emergency homeless shelters and services, mortgage reduction loans and renovation and construction of homes for low-income residents.

-In addition, the Santa Fe Civic Housing Authority and Santa Fe County Housing Authority provide roughly 1,300 housing choice vouchers and 750 units of housing to low-income residents in the city.

### The Living Wage Ordinance Reform Proposal

Based on discussions with various stakeholders, staff analysis and research performed by economist Reilly S. White, Associate Dean of the Anderson School of Management at the University of New Mexico, Mayor Webber recommends the following changes to the current ordinance:

-Raise the living wage to \$17.50/hour in early 2027. Approving the adjustment but delaying its implementation until 2027 allows employers time to prepare for the increase and navigate the current economic uncertainty.

-Continue to include income from tips in calculating the living wage as is currently provided in the Living Wage ordinance. Nonprofit organizations whose primary source of funds is from Medicaid remain exempted. The value of health care and/or childcare benefits continues to count in the calculation of wages paid to employees.

-Following the implementation of the new \$17.50/hour living wage, adjust the formula for calculating the annual increase. Rather than using only the Western Region CPI, the new formula would also include the H.U.D Fair Market Rent for a 2-bedroom unit in Santa Fe, combining the two figures on a 50-50 basis. The purpose of adding in the H.U.D Fair Market Rent is to acknowledge the primary role that housing plays in the high cost of living in Santa Fe. Combining the CPI with the Fair Market Rent more accurately addresses the fundamental challenge workers face in being able to live in Santa Fe. The Fair Market Rent figure is published by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and is Santa Fe specific and publicly available.

-Cap any annual increase in the living wage at 5% and prohibit any decrease in the living wage if housing costs should dip dramatically in any given year. Historical data suggest that living wage growth will fall within the 2-4% range. The 5% cap would be triggered only in rare years. Similarly, the floor would only apply in deep deflationary cycles.

<b>Year</b>	<b>10th pct (0.00%)</b>	<b>50th pct (2.6%)</b>	<b>90th pct (5.0%)</b>
2025	\$15.00	\$15.00	\$15.00
2026	\$15.00	\$15.00	\$15.00
2027	\$17.50	\$17.50	\$17.50
2028	\$17.50	\$17.96	\$18.38
2029	\$17.50	\$18.42	\$19.29
2030	\$17.50	\$18.90	\$20.26
2031	\$17.50	\$19.39	\$21.27
2032	\$17.50	\$19.90	\$22.33
2033	\$17.50	\$20.41	\$23.45
2034	\$17.50	\$20.94	\$24.62
2035	\$17.50	\$21.49	\$25.86

This chart indicates that the most likely scenario based on historical CPI increases and housing growth is that the proposed living wage will grow at 2.6% per year. If there is little or no inflation and little to no rent increases over the next ten years, the living wage will remain at \$17.50/hour. If both rise significantly over the next decade, the annual living wage increase is capped at 5% per year.

## **Conclusion**

Santa Fe's future depends on many factors—none more important than policies that guide who lives here now and in the future. Much of the unique character of Santa Fe derives from the composition of our community. Santa Fe has always been a diverse place, with some families tracing their roots back for many generations and others proud to be new arrivals. The city depends on workers in a variety of jobs and industries whose labor makes the economy go; it also has retirees who contribute their time as volunteers and their support to worthy causes.

Keeping that blend of people through increased housing opportunities and updated living wage—a key population strategy for Santa Fe—will play a critical role in the city's future, its character, its distinctive culture, its quality of life, and its sense of place and livability.

A population strategy has many components, but none is more important than the combination of affordable housing and a living wage.

As this memo lays out, there is a gap between what it costs to live in Santa Fe and what people who work in Santa Fe are paid. The living wage ordinance, adopted in 2002, displayed foresight and courage in addressing what was already seen as a gap back then. In the last 23 years, the gap has grown wider, forcing more working Santa Feans to leave the city where they work and have roots, and relocate to less expensive communities. There are numerous negative consequences—economic, social, and more—of allowing that long-standing trend to continue, not the least of which are the losses of diversity and community continuity in Santa Fe.

Data suggests that City policies on the supply side have had some impact on the cost of rental units in Santa Fe. More production, particularly of multi-family rental units, will continue to have meaningful impact on the reduction of rental costs. The next step is to make an adjustment to the living wage.

This proposal increases the living wage \$17.50/hour after a one-year period for planning and observation. It maintains the existing provisions for exceptions. It creates a new blended formula for calculating any annual increase, using both the Consumer Price Index and Fair Market Rent data specific to Santa Fe, a reflection of the key role that housing costs play in what constitutes a living wage. It caps any increase at 5%, guarding against an untenable increase for employees, and establishes a floor of 0% preventing the living wage from going down in the case of an economic crisis.

This two-pronged strategy represents another commitment of the City to address the needs of both employees and employers and puts the City on record as supporting a strategy that will keep Santa Fe, Santa Fe when it comes to who lives and works our the city.