

A-37

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Katherine Douglas

Public Comment - COLAB

From: Andy Caldwell <andy@colabsbc.org>
Sent: Monday, September 9, 2024 9:33 AM
To: sbcob
Cc: Steve Lavagnino; Bob Nelson; Joan Hartmann; Das Williams; Laura Capps; Mona Miyasato
Subject: Public Comment A 37 including CEQA and Brown Act concerns
Attachments: boscommentagminwage.pdf
Importance: High

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COLAB

The Coalition of Labor, Agriculture & Business

Public Comment Item A-37

County Supervisor's Meeting, Sept. 10, 2024

Dear Chairman Lavagnino and Members of the Board,

The Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business (COLAB) represents members from every ag commodity group in the county. We request that several things be addressed with respect to your proposed action to appoint Supervisors Williams and Hartmann to an ad-hoc committee to study a proposed living wage ordinance for farmworkers in Santa Barbara County that includes the following concerns:

1. The CAUSE and MICOP Report "Harvesting Dignity" which generated this action needs to be INDEPENDENTLY fact-checked as the agricultural community takes exception to many of the assertions pertaining to the working conditions and pay of our local farmworker population. Two examples of this phenomenon? The report tries to compare the annual wages of SEASONAL farmworkers to year-round occupations such as trucking and construction. Regarding the relative safety of these different job classifications, the objective standard which rates the safety of these occupations is worker compensation rates which clearly indicate working on a farm is not a dangerous occupation. Furthermore, see here where ag rates dead last with respect to fatal work injury rates:

<https://www.bls.gov/charts/census-of-fatal-occupational-injuries/civilian-occupations-with-high-fatal-work-injury-rates.htm>.

There are several other omissions and errors in the report (which has a focus on the strawberry industry) including omitting the piece-work rates that workers earn on top of base-wage earnings. The truth of the matter? Strawberry workers are among the highest paid row crop workers in the state and nation!

2. Your staff report indicates that this action will be considered exempt from CEQA for either direct or indirect impacts. Whereas that might be true of the study itself, any subsequent action to raise the minimum wage for farmworkers in our county would surely result in Class 1 impacts to farming itself, not to mention housing, schools, financial institutions and many other interrelated sectors of our economy by way of severe economic disruption to the largest sector of our economy and the largest zoning designation in the county. Because the report gives no context to the fact that many sectors of our ag economy have been losing money for the past two or more years, the additional cost burdens of a wage hike while ignoring market conditions would CERTAINLY cause the conversion of thousands of acres of farm land to other uses (just in time for the next cycle of RHNA and Santa Maria annexations!), along with economic disruption to the tens of thousands of workers and their families who will find themselves out of work because our local farmers would no longer be able to compete with other CA counties,

states, and nations. The County of Santa Barbara has a very long history of requiring EIR's, not to mention prohibitions, for any actions that could serve to convert farmland to other uses. The proposed action would lead to urbanization pressures unlike any other project in the history of the county.

3. The report indicates the ad-hoc committee will not be subject to the Brown Act. Presumably that means Supervisors Williams and Hartmann will not be meeting with the affected communities in a public setting! As you well know, when this item comes back to the board of supervisors for deliberation the ag community will most likely have a grand total of 2 minutes each to defend their right and opportunity to stay in business due to the imposition of a single sector minimum wage if approved by your board. A series of public workshops, on the other hand, will give the ag community the opportunity to correct the record as it relates to farmworker pay, benefits, and working conditions in the county.

4. With all due respect, we object to the appointment of Supervisor Williams, who will be out of office in a few short months, to this committee for the obvious reason that he does not represent the districts in the county that grow strawberries which is the primary focus of the "Harvesting Dignity" report. Your board has repeatedly emphasized that your core value of working together has to do with embracing "collegiality", which is defined as "cooperative interaction among colleagues". Whereas Supervisor Hartmann has some row crops in her district, Supervisor Williams has virtually none in comparison to the Santa Maria Valley. Therefore, the respectable thing to do here is to have an elected representative of the affected valley on this committee who can be more responsive to affected constituents.

5. The "Harvesting Dignity" report is laced with accusations that the pay and working conditions in agriculture are a byproduct of racism. The ag community rejects this allegation completely. The irony here is that the overwhelming majority of strawberry growers are Hispanic themselves, many of whom began their career in agriculture as field workers. Anecdotally, when COLAB received the Strawberry Association "Industry Partner of the Year Award" in 2019, the entire event was conducted in Spanish!

In conclusion, many of the things CAUSE and MICOP are complaining about are the product of government policies and market conditions, many of which are beyond your board's ability to control. That would include the cost of housing and inflation. Every government body in our state is grappling with the need for affordable housing. Raising hourly rates for one sector or another will not address the underlying complexities of supply and demand. Moreover, would the board please consider that on at least two occasions when local farmers tried to build housing for their workers, they were prevented from doing so, once by arson and the other by regulatory fiat that elevated the interests of tiger salamanders over farmworkers.

With respect to inflation, how will the proposed 60% increase in wage rates for farmworkers help the average citizen afford to put food on their table? That is, this action will not make housing more affordable, but it will make food even more unaffordable. Speaking of the CA minimum wage and the fact that CA growers must pay overtime rates, these two actions have already caused some growers to go out of business in our region.

The elephant in the room here is the impact this proposed policy will have on farm workers themselves. We urge your board to receive a presentation, from across the entire ag industry, on profit margins, or the lack thereof, in the farming industry. We firmly believe that ANY localized increase in the minimum wage will have the direst effect on the farm workers you seek to help.

We also request that your board dust off the Ag Study that was commissioned by a previous board more than a decade ago. It clearly defined that the cost of doing business for ag in the county, including land and labor costs, determined what crop was produced where. The last row crop has always been a row of houses when farmers had no other options. We don't believe you want that. The ag community certainly does not and neither do our farm workers.

Andy Caldwell
Executive Director
COLAB