

Senator Lisa Baker
Public Hearing – Increasing the Minimum Wage
May 5, 2015

Public officials and taxpayers share an interest in seeing a Pennsylvania where good, family-sustaining jobs are readily available and poverty is substantially reduced. The ongoing discussion of whether state government is a help or a hindrance in economic growth covers everything from tax structure to education and training to wage levels.

A standard piece in the debate is the minimum wage. Some people are wondering why there is a need to hold another hearing. The simple answer is that circumstances have changed, warranting a fresh look.

We have a new administration putting priority on the subject. It is fair to gauge reaction to their proposal. We have had substantial turnover in legislative ranks since the last time action was taken to increase the minimum wage. So we cannot assume everyone is locked into a position. There is a renewed push by a coalition of advocacy groups looking for a still higher hourly rate. Legislators frequently encourage people to get involved in the process and to make their case. When people do so, we should take the time to listen and consider what they have to say.

This hearing features an array of perspectives. It is not a stacked deck discussion. The various sides are quite practiced in advocacy and rebuttal. There are statistics and anecdotes and position papers and studies and scholarly observations to support every point of view. We have to sift through them and attempt to reach an economically sound conclusion. Input is not limited to those testifying today. Our committee will be happy to receive and review material from any interested citizen or organization.

Key questions include: Is mandating an increase in the minimum wage the best way to help those it is intended to help? Is there a magic number that maximizes the benefits for low-income workers without costing others their jobs or opportunities for gaining employment?

It does seem we cannot consider this issue in isolation, ignoring the impact of other factors affecting the bottom lines for employers and employees, such as health care costs and taxes. At the same time, while the merits of the issue matter, its place on an agenda filled with major priorities of both parties will play into the outcome too.

Everyone is aware that some of the nation's major employers have recently announced wage increases. That step can be used equally to argue for or against the necessity of further government intervention.

As committee chair, I appreciate the willingness of so many to offer their informed and passionate perspectives. This issue is at once one of economics and emotions, featuring elements of finance and faith. So it is to be expected that there will be plenty of questions, comments, and contrary expressions. In the end, we will be better prepared to decide.