The Washington Post

Maryland

Montgomery Council votes to increase minimum wage

By Bill Turque November 26, 2013

The Montgomery County Council voted overwhelmingly to establish the county's own minimum wage Tuesday, approving a historic increase that will lift the hourly rate to \$11.50 by 2017 — far above the current state and federal minimum of \$7.25.

The council's action, which followed nearly four hours of tense and occasionally acrimonious debate, is the leading edge of an unusual regional effort by Montgomery, Prince George's County and the District to raise the wage. The Prince George's County Council is expected to vote Wednesday, and an initial vote by the D.C. Council is set for Dec. 3.

It is also part of a national movement by state and local governments to address growing wage inequality where Congress has not. The federal minimum has not been raised in four years. New Jersey, California and New York have all approved minimum wage increases this year.

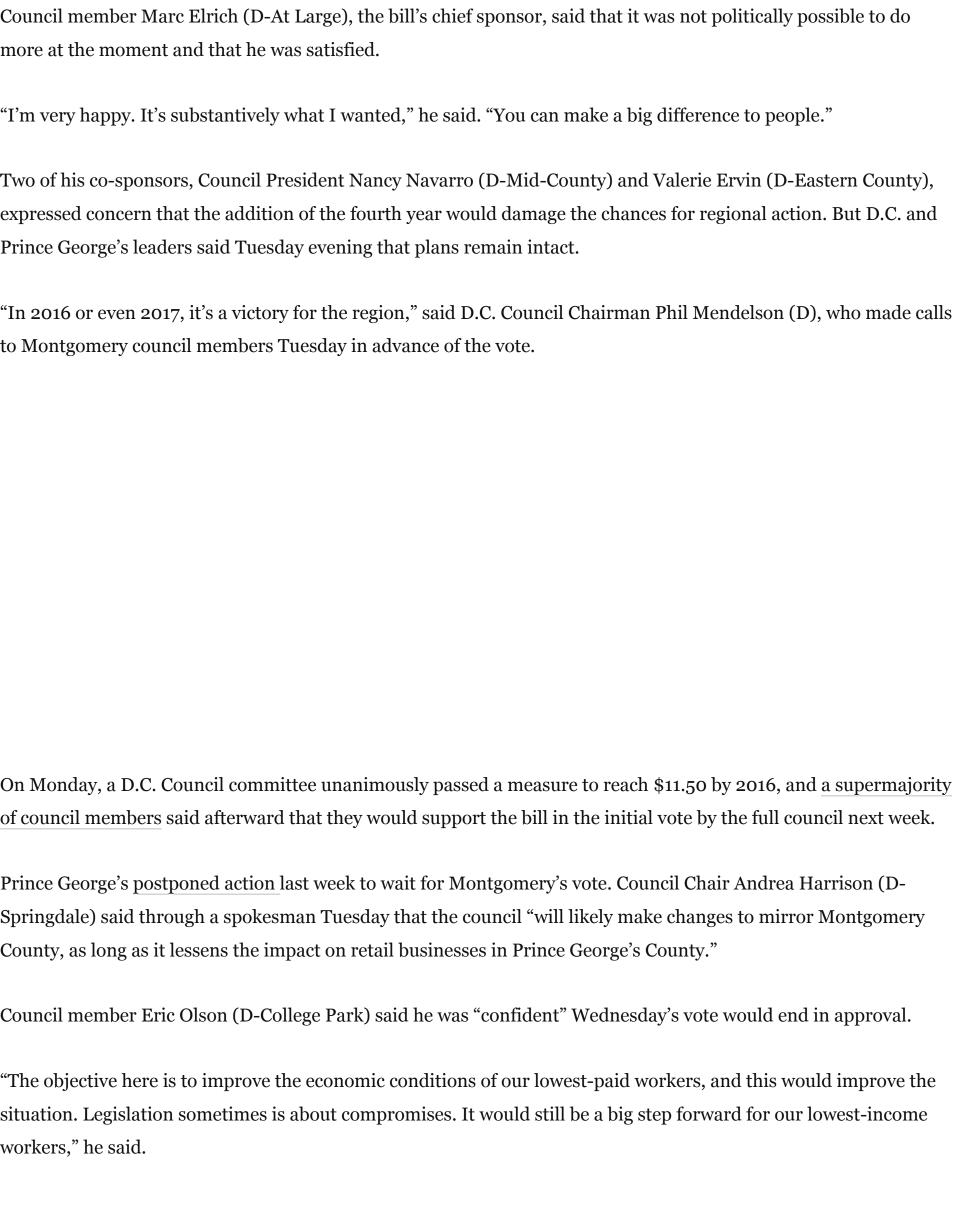
Local Headlines newsletter

Daily headlines about the Washington region.

Sign up

The Montgomery bill increases the wage in annual steps to \$8.40 in October 2014, \$9.55 in 2015, \$10.75 in 2016 and \$11.50 in 2017.

During debate, the measure was amended to extend the phase-in period from three to four years, reflecting concerns that the wage was being raised too high and too fast. At \$11.50, an individual's annual income is \$23,600 — still well below what it takes to subsist in Montgomery, where living costs are significantly above the national average.



Montgomery's vote represents a significant legislative achievement for Elrich, a former elementary school math
teacher who is regarded as the most liberal on the left-leaning, all-Democratic council. As such, he has often been
the lone opposing vote on many issues.
He received a chilly reception when he first announced his intention to introduce minimum wage legislation in late

He received a chilly reception when he first announced his intention to introduce minimum wage legislation in late August, shortly before Labor Day. Many Montgomery council members maintained that the wage was strictly a state and federal matter.

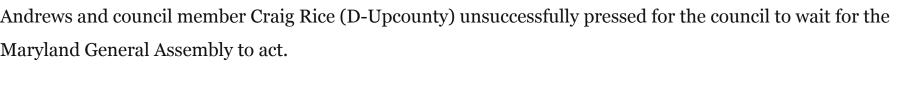
But Elrich persisted and said he developed the idea of a regional approach after speaking with business leaders who expressed concern that unilateral action by Montgomery could put the county at a competitive disadvantage. He said he reached out to Harrison at a meeting of the Maryland Association of Counties in the summer and later spoke to Mendelson.

Elrich's cause also benefited from a national and regional political climate favorably disposed to raising the wage.

National polls showed Americans overwhelmingly in favor of President Obama's unsuccessful attempt to secure an increase.

The Montgomery council's final 8 to 1 vote — Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville) opposed the measure — papered over serious differences and legal uncertainties surrounding the bill.

County attorneys told council members that the bill was limited to covering employees doing work in the county for firms "operating and doing business in the county." Council attorney Robert Drummer said some situations — such as a landscaping company from outside the county sending workers into Montgomery — might be "problematic" from a legal standpoint and vulnerable to a court challenge.



But others maintained that delay was not an option.

"Delaying the bill is killing the bill," Ervin said. "Let's have the courage to do the right thing."

The turning point came when council member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda) proposed amending Elrich's bill by raising the wage to \$10.75 in 2016 and the lesser of \$11.50 or \$1 over the state minimum in 2017. Rice, who was expected to join Andrews, Nancy Floreen (D-At Large), Hans Riemer (D-At Large) and George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) on Berliner's resolution, suddenly switched and agreed to back \$11.50 over three years.

Berliner's motion passed 5 to 4, but Rice's defection effectively collapsed the coalition, setting the stage for an amendment by Elrich to raise the minimum to \$11.50 over four years with no conditions attached.

His amendment passed 6 to 3, allowing the final vote to approve the wage increase.

Bill Turque, who covers Montgomery County government and politics, has spent more than thirty years as a reporter and editor for The Washington Post, Newsweek, the Dallas Times Herald and The Kansas City Star. Follow @bturque