

# Living wage called a sham

Split vote deprives casual, temporary staff of benefits

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The City of Calgary moved closer Wednesday to becoming the first Canadian city to adopt a living wage policy, but the policy does nothing for temporary or casual workers — the very employees that would have prospered from such a proposal.

"If you have a living wage policy, you have a living wage policy," said Ald. Brian Pincott. "You don't have a half-assed living wage policy that is throwing a name on something that you're already

\$450,000 annually.

They also dismissed the options of demanding civic partners — such as Heritage Park — and any city contractor pay their employees a living wage.

Wednesday's decisions, which have to go to city council, left some angry at what they said was a choice to do nothing.

David Wilson of Vibrant Communities Calgary, which has been lobbying for the more wide-ranging options for at least five years, said he was "devastated" by the city's "lack of leadership."

"We'll probably get some praise (for being the first Canadian city to adopt the policy)," he said.

"But behind the praise, it's false applause. It's the easy way out. Real leaders make tough decisions."

Aldermen did agree on taking steps toward another

doing.

More than five hours of questions and impassioned arguments that featured everything from rabbis to Raging Grannies ended with a city committee choosing the option that formally adopts a policy but changes nothing substantial and doesn't cost the city a penny.

The option would see the city pay all regular employees a living wage, generally considered to be a salary above the poverty line.

But because the city's 14,000 employees already make more than the \$13.25 hourly wage (without benefits) needed to get above that cut-off, the policy adopted on Wednesday changes nothing.

In a nearly-split vote, aldermen rejected the idea of paying a living wage to temporary and casual staff, which would have cost the city an estimated

report that would break down the costs of more ambitious options.

"Let's see what the costs are and get the whole picture before us," said Ald. Andre Chabot, who believes the costs of expanding the policy could be larger than estimated.

There were some voices against any form of a living wage policy.

Danielle Smith, Alberta director of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, contended that requiring contractors to pay high salaries would force some out of business.

"They'd probably prefer to have a job, rather than no job," she said of contractors' employees.

Ald. Linda Fox-Mellway, meanwhile, voted against all living wage options because she sees salary benchmarks as a provincial responsibility.

She is also worried over the impact of forcing civic partners to pay the wage, saying a letter from Heritage Park CEO Alida Visbach put the cost of doing that at \$500,000 for the park alone.

"And then do we have to give them more money to make up for it?" Fox-Mellway said.

But others argued that not paying a living wage increases other costs for the city.

Tim Richter, president and CEO of the Calgary Homeless Foundation, said more poverty usually translates into more policing, legal and social costs for Calgary.

"It's pay now or pay later," he said, adding the foundation itself pays a living wage. "If we can do it, you can."



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TIM RICHTER, CALGARY HOMELESS FOUNDATION

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