

San Jose will study measure to boost hours for part-time employees

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San Jose City Hall lies between S. 4th and S. 6th streets on Santa Clara St. in San Jose. (LiPo Ching/Staff archives)

SAN JOSE -- City leaders Tuesday agreed to study a measure headed for the November ballot that would require San Jose businesses to offer part-time workers more hours before hiring new employees.

Silicon Valley labor leaders who last year joined forces to launch the "Opportunity to Work" initiative gathered enough signatures to qualify it for the ballot. But they urged the City Council to adopt the measure's provisions as a city law, which would save San Jose the \$927,794 cost of putting it on the November ballot.

But city leaders said they first needed to know more about the measure's potential costs and benefits. Business groups worry the measure goes too far and will hurt economic development. The study unanimously approved by the council must be finished by June 23 to leave time for the city to act before the November ballot deadline. The city will pay the costs of the study, which were unknown Tuesday.

Councilman Raul Peralez, who advocated for the study, said the city should look at the growth of part-time work and the number of part-time workers who would be eligible for benefits if given more hours.

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The proposal, led by the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council, excludes "small businesses" with fewer than 35 employees. Activists say it would boost wages and living conditions for 64,000 part-time workers struggling to survive in Silicon Valley. Roughly 63 percent of those part-time workers are women while 69 percent are minorities, according to a labor study released last month.

Matthew Mahood, president and CEO of the San Jose Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce, said the initiative jeopardizes an employer's ability to hire a workforce that meets its needs.

"The Opportunity to Work initiative creates a new significant barrier to this flexibility, especially those

employers who have historically created employment opportunities for at-risk youth, disadvantaged workers and others who are new to the workforce," Mahood said.

According to the measure's proponents, two private polls they commissioned show San Jose voters support the idea. The polls conducted by EMC Research in December and January surveyed 949 total likely voters through a Web survey and phone calls. In the phone survey, 54 percent of voters said they would vote yes on the measure, while 3 percent said they are leaning toward voting yes.

In their campaign for the measure, labor leaders who called the measure a first of its kind have said some large businesses -- they mention McDonald's specifically -- are dividing work among part-timers at growing rates. Supporters of the measure say the employers are trying to avoid paying benefits often restricted to full-time employees.

McDonald's officials were not available to comment Tuesday.

"The valley economy is facing a crisis of underemployment," said Derecka Mehrens, executive director of Working Partnerships USA, a nonprofit labor think-tank backing the measure. "There are tens of thousands of hourly workers in the valley, and the percentage of those who are working only part time has shot up dramatically just in the last decade."

Alejandra Mejia has worked as a McDonald's manager for nearly a decade. Yet the single mom said she never gets more than 30 hours a week -- despite needing the money to feed her three kids and pay rent in one of the country's priciest cities.

"They don't give us any extra hours and hire more people," said Mejia, 29, adding that her part-time status disqualifies her from getting medical benefits. "We've been working there a long time, but they prefer hiring more people."

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