

City tackles ethics policy: Advocates push wage component

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Social advocates are urging aldermen to sign off on a policy today that would call on suppliers to city hall to prove they're meeting high ethical and environmental standards.

And they want the city to consider adding a "living wage" requirement to encourage suppliers to pay local employees at least \$10 an hour.

Ramona Johnston, director of **Vibrant Communities Calgary**, said the city's proposed purchasing policy has the potential to do a lot of good.

"It's critical to ensure public tax dollars are being used to support businesses and employers who are engaged in ethical and environmental business practices," she said.

But the city's finance committee, which will debate the plan today, is divided over the idea of creating a code of ethics for suppliers.

"It's an ill-conceived plan," said Ald. Ric McIver, adding small firms are worried they'll be burdened with piles of paperwork that will keep them from doing business with the city.

"It's an airy, fairy idea," he added.

However, Ald. Druh Farrell, who helped launch the initiative, believes the city should use its economic clout to encourage positive change.

"We actually have the power to make a difference by changing our buying habits," said Farrell, who will attend today's meeting.

The city buys about \$900 million of goods and services annually.

If the policy is later approved by council, Calgary would be following a trend among North American cities setting similar standards.

The city's intent is to encourage suppliers to meet the criteria set out by its supplier code of conduct, which covers issues ranging from workplace safety to pollution control.

Suppliers would also be responsible for ensuring their subcontractors are compliant with the code.

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business warned Monday the proposal would harm small firms by forcing them to invest in costly investigations of their supply chains.

But supporters of the policy don't see it as a business hurdle.

"The majority of small employers we're talking about likely don't have onerous supply chains," Johnston said.

Johnston, whose organization works to reduce poverty, will ask aldermen today to consider adding a "living wage" component to the proposal.

It's hoped that would encourage suppliers to offer wages of at least \$10 an hour with benefits, or \$11.25 an hour in lieu of benefits. Alberta's minimum wage is \$7 an hour.

Ald. Helene Larocque, who sits on the committee, said it's not unreasonable to seek such a policy, adding the minimum wage doesn't stretch far enough in Calgary.

But Ald. Gord Lowe, who supports the idea of an ethical purchasing policy, thinks the idea of adding a "living wage" to the strategy is a non-starter.

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