

By Sarah Cavacini scavacini@palatkadailynews.com October 22, 2020 Publication: Palatka Daily News (FL) Page: A1 Word Count: 587

Early voting kicked off in Putnam County this week with a minimum wage raise amendment on this year's ballot.

The amendment would raise minimum wage to \$10 an hour on Sept. 30, 2021. It would continue to increase by \$1 until reaching \$15 per hour Sept. 30, 2026

“Future minimum wage increases shall revert to being adjusted annually for inflation starting September 30th, 2027,” according to the 2020 ballot. “State and local government costs will increase to comply with the new minimum wage levels.”

The Putnam County Chamber of Commerce did not take a stance on the amendment, but the Florida Chamber of Commerce advocated against the proposed changes.

Florida Chamber officials said earlier this month in an email now would not be the right time to raise wages because of the coronavirus pandemic.

“Amendment 2, if passed, would create a drag on Florida's economy, for Florida's local employers who are currently facing incredible challenges in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and for Floridians who currently work in entry level jobs – the very group this amendment claims it helps,” Florida Chamber officials said. “The amendment will cause Florida to lose potentially hundreds of thousands (of) jobs, hurt local businesses, increase the cost of living for seniors, drive good jobs elsewhere or even to automation and drive up inflation.”

Cheryl Lynch, who works as a business consultant in Palatka for the Small Business Development Center, said amendments will never fully benefit everybody.

“It's a give and take,” Lynch said.

Smaller businesses that need to bring on more employees might struggle if costs increase, but if the business is growing the amendment repercussions may not be as harsh, she said.

According to the amendment, annual wage costs will be \$16 million in 2022 and up to \$540 million by 2027.

“This proposed constitutional amendment is estimated to have a net negative impact on the state budget,” according to the ballot. “This impact may result in higher taxes or a loss of government services in order to maintain a balanced state budget as required by the constitution.”

Georgia-Pacific, Putnam County's largest private employer, did not wish to provide a comment on an issue that will be decided by voters.

“As a market-based company, we generally want to see wages set by the local market – what companies are willing to pay and what workers are willing to work for, as a mechanism to set entry pay,” GP Public Affairs Manager Mark Brown said in an email. “In Florida, as in all the states where we operate, our employees are paid at competitive market rates based on their individual skills and talents, and in some cases at pay rates negotiated with representing labor unions. In Florida specifically, we paid more than \$129 million wages/benefits to our employees in 2019.”

Florida Chamber officials said there is no right time to “penalize low-skilled workers and those looking to get into the labor market.”

“While Amendment 2 may look good on paper, it will displace many low-wage earners as businesses are forced to shift their workforce and move to automation,” officials said in an email. “The amendment is effectively a tax increase that would cause cost of living to increase and force families to pay more for necessities like food, clothes, goods and services. Indeed, it’s likely that more people would lose jobs than those who would be brought out of poverty.”

The amendment is one of six on this year’s ballot. Sample ballots can be found at palatkadailynews.com and at soe.putnam-fl.com.

Copyright 2020 by Palatka Daily News -all rights reserved.