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Nov. 08, 2013

A town in Washington state may have just voted for a minimum wage of \$15 per hour. If this was any other small town of its size, it might go unnoticed, but this town is SeaTac.

For frequent fliers, SeaTac means the Seattle international airport (named for Seattle and Tacoma), which I've flown into a few times, including to visit automated online sales tax leader Avalara, which has offices in Seattle, as well as on nearby Bainbridge Island. It was an interesting ferry ride between the two.

The thing is, SeaTac is also a municipality in its own right. Considered a suburb of Seattle, it is only about 10 square miles, with a population of around 27,000 people. It is, basically, the area around the airport, but also includes several other communities.

So back to the minimum wage. Since Washington state is one of only two states in the nation (the other is Oregon) to require voting by mail, the results of Tuesday's vote (November 5, 2013) is not yet known, but pundits are predicting that the final count will show a win for the raise. Of note, the national minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour, although many states and some cities have passed legislation requiring higher minimum wages, including New Jersey, which also did so last Tuesday, but to \$8.25 per hour, with automatic annual increases.

Washington state is also one of the states with a higher mandated minimum wage, which (apart from SeaTac's possible new rate), is set for the state at \$9.19 per hour. Oregon comes in second-highest, at \$8.95 per hour, while California (\$8.00),

Connecticut (\$8.25), Illinois (\$8.25), Massachusetts (\$8.00), Nevada (\$8.25), and

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follows:

After claiming victory in SeaTac, backers of a \$15-an-hour minimum wage are turning their attention to Seattle.

Labor activists who backed the measure that raises wages for airport-related workers in SeaTac said Wednesday that the push is on to raise Seattle's wage floor to \$15 for all workers.

“There is going to be a debate about a \$15 minimum wage in Seattle, and it will be led by our new mayor,” said David Rolf, president of the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Seattle-based Healthcare 775 NW local.

“There are citizens who are perfectly ready to move an initiative to ballot next year if an agreement can't be reached at City Hall between labor and business,” he said. “But I'm hopeful that we can engage in a reasonable dialogue about how to get to \$15.”

SeaTac Proposition 1 creates an hourly minimum wage of \$15 for hospitality and transportation workers in and around the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

With 3,942 votes counted as of Wednesday, Proposition 1 led 53 percent to 47 percent — a difference of 236 votes out of a total of 12,100 registered voters citywide.

Proposition 1 supporters said they registered nearly 1,000 new SeaTac voters in the run-up to the election, and new voters tend to cast last-minute ballots.

Washington's mail-in voting system means ballots could be postmarked as late as Tuesday, so vote counting will continue through Friday.

The measure's opponents said they remain cautiously optimistic.

“There still are so many more votes to be counted,” said Scott Ostrander, general

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“I had an elected official from Lynnwood come up to me Tuesday night and say, 'You should think about this in Lynnwood,?'" Rolf said. “It is a signal from the future. It's telling us that voters and the public are sick of waiting for politicians and CEOs to do the right thing.”

The push for a \$15 minimum wage comes amid widespread concern about income inequality and a lack of jobs that provide middle-class pay and benefits.

Seattle's mayor-elect, Ed Murray, seized on the issue last summer as fast-food workers nationwide called for a \$15-an-hour “living wage.”

Murray pledged to raise Seattle's hourly wage floor to \$15, and incumbent Mike McGinn vowed to go even higher if the City Council agreed.

Murray has said he backs a phased-in approach, starting with city workers and then extending it to employees of national fast-food chains and retailers.

Wednesday, Murray told reporters he'll bring both business and labor to the bargaining table.

“I think there is interest from both sides to do this collaboratively — dare I use the word — versus ending up with a ballot measure,” Murray said.

Although he did not offer a precise timeline, Murray said he would work on the issue “early” in his administration and hoped to have a \$15 minimum wage by the end of his first term, with protections for small businesses and others.

Maud Daudon, president and CEO of Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, said she's encouraged that Murray wants a “robust discussion.”

The chamber opposed SeaTac Proposition 1, but has not yet declared its position on a

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The idea of giving low-wage workers a pay raise is gaining momentum.

Also Tuesday, voters in New Jersey overwhelmingly approved a measure to raise the state's minimum wage by a dollar to \$8.25 an hour and to peg it to inflation. That makes New Jersey the 11th state, including Washington, to require annual inflation adjustments.

Nationally, the federal minimum wage has been at \$7.25 an hour since 2009. On Jan. 1, Washington's minimum wage will increase by 13 cents to \$9.32, the highest of any state.

Congressional Democrats are calling for a hike in the federal minimum wage to \$10.10. But with Congress in gridlock, local policymakers are taking matters into their own hands, said Paul Sonn, of the National Employment Law Project.

"We're going to see more cities call for higher minimum wages," Sonn said. "More and more college graduates are working in jobs like retail or restaurants. These jobs are becoming a bigger part of our economy, and cities and states are struggling with that."

Four major California airports already require their tenants to pay minimum wages well above the statewide standard. At Los Angeles International Airport, workers are guaranteed an hourly minimum of \$10.91, or \$15.67 without health benefits.

California lawmakers in September committed to boost the state's hourly minimum standard from \$8 to \$10 by 2016.

In Albuquerque, N.M., and San Jose, Calif., voters last November raised local wage floors. And in New York City, Mayor-elect Bill de Blasio, who tapped voter frustration with rising income inequality, supports a separate minimum wage above the statewide rate.

“If you pay workers a living wage, that's good for everybody,” said Seattle venture

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