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Portland City Council said anything Wednesday in response to his public testimony about a \$15 minimum wage for Portlanders.

Jun. 15, 2014

Justin Norton-Kertson admits he was “kind of surprised” that members of the Portland City Council said anything Wednesday in response to his public testimony about a \$15 minimum wage for Portlanders.

But the co-founder of 15 Now PDX, the activist organization that's lobbying for Portland and the state to push for a dramatic increase to the minimum wage, did get an unexpected response.

Oregon state law preempts local municipalities in setting the minimum wage. Norton-Kertson said the city needs to push state lawmakers to remove the preemption and allow cities to set their own wages.

Norton-Kertson and 15 Now PDX presented a petition with 1,000 signatures to City Council, and said the city can and should enact a couple policy changes immediately that would help improve the cost of living for Portlanders: mainly, pay all city employees \$15 an hour, and require contractors that work with the city to pay their workers that wage, too.

The 15 Now campaign also calls for creating a living wage tax on local businesses that don't pay employees the \$15 wage. Nicholas Caleb, a Southeast Portland resident and Concordia University adjunct professor, ran for a City Council seat and advocated for many of these issues.

City Commissioners aren't always inclined to respond to public comments before their regular council session begins, but both

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to raise their wages to meet that threshold. It would cost the bureau \$2.7 million to raise the wages of the more than 2,000 seasonal workers who earn less than \$15 per hour, according to Fritz staffers.

The 2,000 seasonal positions aren't include in the 5,522 total positions included in the current 2013-14 budget year, according to city budget officials.

Norton-Kertson said he hopes the City Council sees the rising cost of inflation in Portland, the costs of goods, food, daily life are increasingly for everyone. "It's increasingly expensive to live here," he said," and the minimum wage needs to be raised."

According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report released in February, the Portland metro area saw the price of goods and services rise 2.8 percent in a 12 month period.

Norton-Kertson said he was "pleasantly surprised" Fritz took the time to research the issue, but added that she seemed skeptical the idea is financially possible.

Portland's neighbor to the north already made national headlines earlier this year by passing a phased-in \$15 wage. Norton-Kertson said Seattle's decision to bump the minimum wage created a sense of momentum in Portland, too.

"Only a year ago, the whole thing didn't seem political viable," he said. Now, Norton-Kertson said, there's a sense a \$15 living wage is inevitable in Portland.

Here's Horton-Kertson's testimony from Wednesday:

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