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## **NYT: \$15 Hourly Minimum Wage in Northwest City Faces Court Challenge.**

SEATTLE — The highest municipal minimum wage in the nation, approved by voters last month in the small city of SeaTac, Wash., at \$15 an hour, survived a narrow election and a recount. Now, just weeks before its scheduled Jan. 1 start date - raising the pay of thousands of SeaTac residents and workers at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, which is within the city limits — opponents are sending in the lawyers.

At a hearing scheduled for Friday in King County Superior Court in Seattle, Judge Andrea Darvas is expected to rule on whether to affirm the statute, strike it down or perhaps hold it in abeyance. Supporters of the measure said they were braced for a loss, and were preparing an emergency appeal to the state's highest court.

The statute, which is being closely watched around the nation by labor and business groups as a barometer of the nation's working wage debate, specifically exempts airlines and small businesses, including restaurants with fewer than 10 employees, but could raise pay for about 6,500 workers on and off airport property and give paid sick days to many of those workers for the first time.

Alaska Airlines and the Washington Restaurant Association are leading the legal challenge, contending that the measure, known as Proposition 1, was too broadly and vaguely written, and that the city has no authority to regulate economic activity at the airport, which is operated by the Port of Seattle.

Although Alaska Airlines employees would not be covered by the law, the company said that higher costs borne by its contractors would be passed on to the airlines and travelers.

The director of government affairs for the Restaurant Association, Bruce Beckett, said he thought that no matter what happens on Friday, the statute could have a long legal road ahead because of the complexity of the issues raised. "I don't know how this can all be resolved by Jan. 1," he said.

Labor leaders, in pushing the wage measure before the election, said that higher wages for airport workers would benefit the entire region, since most of those workers live outside the city of SeaTac.

In responding to the legal challenge, Heather Weiner, a spokeswoman for a group that worked for Proposition 1's passage, derided the lawsuit as containing "everything but the legal kitchen sink."

Washington already has the highest state minimum in the nation, at \$9.19, but stands to be surpassed by California, which recently approved a \$10 minimum, phased in over two years. The federal minimum is \$7.25. The SeaTac statute passed by just 77 votes out of about 6,000 cast - a number affirmed in the recount results that were announced this week.

Friday's hearing will not be the first time Proposition 1 has come before Judge Darvas. In August, she threw the measure off the ballot, agreeing with opponents that the signature process had been flawed. Her order was later reversed by an appeals court in time for the election.

But she also stressed in her ruling at the time that she was taking no position on the underlying question about minimum wage levels — only on the technical aspects of the law.

“The court wishes to emphasize that its decision in this matter has nothing whatsoever to do with the substance of the initiative itself,” she wrote.

By KIRK JOHNSON

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