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Now businesses that get tax breaks from the city will have to give something back.

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$7.49 an hour? It's fair

The "living wage" ordinance signed last week by Boston Mayor Thomas Menino marks a significant step forward for thousands of families in this city who, despite a steady income, trudge through life day after day as Boston's working poor.

These are people who juggle two and three jobs to keep their children clothed and fed, their lights turned on, and their heat bills paid. Who can argue that these people – deserving, upstanding citizens – should not get something back from the city in which they live?

The living-wage ordinance does just that. It requires businesses who get something from the city – a major tax break, subsidy, or service contract of more than $100,000 – to give something back to the residents who have financed such opportunities for growth and economic development.

What is most startling about the recent debate over the living-wage ordinance is that the people who will benefit, Boston's working poor, are being totally ignored. How tiring it is to hear time and time again that Boston's business community is getting yet another tax break or initiative passed in its favor to further prove that our city is in fact a "business friendly" one. Why is there never any mention of the workers, the men and women on the front lines who produce astonishing profits for top-tier management?

Representatives of Boston's business community have called the legislation "bad public policy" and "most troublesome." These same business leaders will swear that the passage of this ordinance will send the sky falling down and topple every single building in Boston's bustling financial district.

That could not be further from the truth.

These naysayers are the same men and women who boldly predicted an increase in the minimum wage to be an outright "job killer" for minority and teenage workers. Almost 11 months since the first of two hikes in the minimum wage has been implemented, detailed economic analysis shows that unemployment is down and that for the first time in years, low-wage workers are able to pocket a few extra dollars.

The same will be true of the living wage when it becomes law in July 1998.

The living wage of $7.49 an hour was not a figure thought up arbitrarily during the dark of the night. The hourly wage was chosen because it represents a family of four at the national poverty line. Is it possible that the members of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce could be averse to paying an employee $15,600 a year to keep a family financially afloat?

Mayor Menino was right when he charged the business community with being "asleep at the switch." This ordinance was not created overnight but resulted from seven months of work and two separate City Council hearings.

No one from the business community attended either meeting.

This ordinance will not be instituted overnight. The mayor will appoint a citizens' committee to oversee the implementation process. The living wage will not become city law until July 1, 1998, allowing the committee a full 10 months to iron out kinks in the ordinance before it goes into effect.

The city has a long and proud history of passing initiatives to help the city's working-class population, from the eight-hour day, to child labor laws, to the newly passed living-wage ordinance. Please let's not get bogged down in minutiae but force employers in Boston to recognize how difficult it is to get ahead as a member of the city's working poor.

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