

What does it cost to live here?

Typical family needs 'living wage' of \$14.88 an hour, 60 hours a week

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How much does it cost to live in Greater Victoria?

More precisely, how much do you have to make an hour to enjoy a modest living?

Since July 2005, the Quality of Life Challenge has tried to answer those questions by researching the real cost of living in B.C.'s capital region.

The challenge — a partnership of local businesses, employment agencies, community members and government — wants to start a "living wage" dialogue on how to make sure people can afford to live and work in our community.

"The reality is an island community is a more expensive place to live," researcher Jane Worton said.

"In this region," she added, "we had a housing boom. And we have higher costs of gas and food because we are importing so many of our commodities."

The first "living wage" campaign began in Baltimore in 1995, when workers in homeless shelters and soup kitchens noticed many of the people coming to them for help had full-time jobs.

Local religious leaders there persuaded city council to raise the base pay for city contract workers from \$4.25 to \$6.10 an hour.

The campaign was based on the belief that no one who works full time should have to live in poverty.

In Greater Victoria, the dialogue is not about increasing the minimum wage; it's a way of improving quality of life, Worton said.



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Munro's Books manager Dave Hill, foreground, has nothing but praise for owner Jim Munro, known for standing behind employees like Hill (in this photo, literally). Through such business practices as profit-sharing, "Jim's created a real livelihood for people," Hill says. It goes to show there are ways to supplement family incomes besides pay increases.

She estimates that a family of four with two employed parents, a 12-yearold and a four-year old, would need a living wage of \$14.88 an hour.

This means one parent employed 40 hours a week and the other working 20 hours a week would each have to be paid an hourly rate of \$14.88 to support a modest lifestyle.

At the end of the month, after paying all their bills — including rent, food, phone, child care, utilities, health care and transportation costs — this family of four would be left with \$6.27.

"This is quite a bare-bones budget," Worton said.

"This isn't a family that owns a car. This isn't a family that's paying back student loans. They rent an apartment. They don't own a home. And they're not saving anything."

Her research is based on data from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the 2004 Capital Regional District survey of household spending, B.C. Transit, Telus, the Victoria Child Care Resource and Referral Centre, the Vancouver Island Health Authority, CRD regional planning services and the Statistics Canada 2001 census.

The work is important, Worton said, because it helps employers understand some of the issues their employees face.

At the same time, it can help employers deal with such problems as a shortage of skilled workers and low unemployment rates.

"Businesses are having real problems with retention [of employees]," Worton said. "If people can't afford to live here and have children here, we can't build a sustainable community. People will move away."

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