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# Minimum-wage vote likely on fall ballot

**By Howard Fischer**

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PHOENIX — Labor unions and their allies filed more than 209,000 signatures Monday to force a public vote over whether Arizona should have a minimum wage higher than required by federal law.

If certified for the ballot and approved in November, the measure would mandate that all Arizona employers pay their workers at least \$6.75 an hour. The federal requirement is \$5.15 an hour, a figure that has not been raised since 1997.

The measure would mandate annual increases tied to inflation, avoiding the need for future legislative or ballot battles.

The petitions still must be reviewed by the Secretary of State's Office. But there appears to be enough of a cushion to ensure that at least the minimum 122,612 will remain after some signers' names are struck because they are not registered to vote or for other reasons.

This could be an expensive campaign. Rebekah Friend, president of the state AFL-CIO, said backers may spend up to \$3 million to persuade voters to approve the change.

The Arizona Restaurant Association, whose members employ many of the people whose wages would be raised, is spearheading the opposition. Association President Steve Chucri said a coalition that also includes retailers and small business owners probably will match the unions' spending.

A statewide survey conducted in March showed that 62 percent of those questioned strongly support the \$1.60-an-hour hike, with another 19 percent somewhat in favor.

The unions' decision to go to the ballot follows years of efforts to have the Legislature approve the measure. Rep. Steve Gallardo, D-Phoenix, who sponsored many of those measures, said he was unable to get the Republican-controlled House even to give the plan a hearing.

"We're going to let the voters of Arizona decide how to move Arizona forward," he said. "And that would be to increase the minimum wage in the state."

Chucri said 90 percent of the people hired by his association's members at the minimum wage advance to higher salaries. "We look at this more as a training wage," he said.

Friend, however, cited statistics from the Economic Policy Institute that showed 25 percent of the Arizonans earning the minimum wage are single mothers, many of whom Friend said work full time.

Friend said someone with a family of four working full-time at minimum wage makes \$10,700 a year, or just over half of the federal poverty level of \$20,000 for a family that size.

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