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# Wal-Mart near Chicago sparks living-wage debate

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CHICAGO — When Wal-Mart opened a store just outside the city limits last winter, it proudly announced it had received a record 25,000 job applications, nearly all from Chicagoans.

It was one of the first salvos in an escalating political and public-relations battle between Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and the City Council, which will consider a proposed ordinance Wednesday that would make Chicago the nation's largest city to require "big box" retailers to pay their workers more.

Mayor Richard M. Daley and others warn the "living wage" proposal will drive jobs and desperately needed development from some of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

Supporters contend Chicago should be a leader in setting standards for worker pay and benefits.

"We don't want any organization to come into our communities and make money without treating our people fairly," said the Rev. Reginald Williams Jr., associate pastor for justice ministry at Trinity United Church of Christ on the city's South Side.

The church is part of a coalition of community and labor groups backing the proposed ordinance, which would require mega-retailers to pay their workers at least \$10 an hour in wages plus \$3 in fringe benefits by July 1, 2010. That is substantially higher than Illinois' \$6.50 minimum wage and the federal minimum of \$5.15.

The measure covers companies with more than \$1 billion in annual sales and stores of at least 90,000 square feet.

The first Wal-Mart in Chicago is set to open in September, and the Bentonville, Ark.-based company has more than 40 other stores within 50 miles of the city. Wal-Mart said its average hourly wage is almost \$11 an hour in the Chicago area and that the lowest wage being paid at the new West Side store will be \$7.25 an hour.

Backers of the proposed Chicago ordinance say they do not believe the doom-and-gloom predictions that giants like Wal-Mart will abandon the city if the measure passes.

"They're not going to leave; they're too greedy," said the Rev. Michael Pflieger, a priest on the South Side.

But Wal-Mart spokesman John Bisio said supporters of the ordinance shouldn't be so sure. "We'd redirect our focus on our suburban strategy and see how we could better serve our city of Chicago residents from suburban Chicagoland," he said.

Other cities with living-wage laws have not suffered any harm, said Paul Sonn, deputy director of the poverty program at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University, whose group helped Chicago aldermen draft the ordinance.

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