

## Data and decency



**Alta LeCompte**  
Around the valley

Since the issue of raising the minimum wage is under consideration at the local, state and national level, it's hard to ignore the topic. Economists weighing in on the issue haven't exactly pointed to a clear path for decision makers to follow in Washington and Santa Fe.

Some economists cite studies concluding an increase in the minimum wage would be a catastrophic blow to business.

Others contend raising the rate has little or no impact — and still others conclude that putting more money in the pockets of workers is good for the economy.

A good example of polarization among economists concerning the minimum wage is the pronouncements of two University of California economists.

One of them is Robert Reich, a UCLA, Berkeley professor and former Clinton administration secretary of labor.

"Employers won't outsource the jobs abroad or substitute machines for them because jobs at this low level of pay are all in the local personal service sector (retail, restaurant, hotel and so on), where employers pass on any small wage hikes to customers as pennies more on their bills," Reich wrote. "States that have a minimum wage closer to \$9 than the current federal minimum don't have higher rates of unemployment than do states still at the federal minimum."

At the other end of the spectrum is UC, Irvine's David Neumark.

Minda McGonagle, who is representing the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB) in lobbying the New Mexico Legislature, refers to Neumark when she articulates the NFIB's opposition to increasing the state's minimum wage to \$8.50.

McGonagle quotes a Friday, Feb. 15, editorial in the Wall Street Journal. "Neumark has looked at more than 100 major academic studies on the minimum wage, and he says the White House claim of de minimis (minimal) job losses 'grossly misstates the weight of the evidence.' About 85 percent of the studies 'find a negative

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## State of independents

### Politics aside, southern New Mexico film industry is thriving

By **David Salcido**  
Las Cruces Bulletin

It would appear — if one were to believe the media hype coming out of Santa Fe recently — that the film industry in New Mexico is on life support and may expire if our public servants in the legislature don't do something about it.

On Friday, Feb. 22, a contingent of Las Cruces filmmakers, led by Film Liaison Mark Wark and instructors representing New Mexico State University's Creative Media Institute (CMI) and Dona Ana Community College's Creative Media Technology (CMT), descended on Santa Fe for Film & Media Day at the Roundhouse, to prove that theory dead wrong.

CMI professor and documentarian Phil Lewis was part of the ambassadorial contingent to the northlands. He sees what's happening in southern New Mexico as a breath of fresh air compared to what's going on in Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

"There are two sides to this industry," he said. "There's the local industry, which is kind of blossoming from the inside out, and there's the way Albuquerque and Santa Fe do it, which is basically hanging their hats on California and spending other people's money to fuel their industry."

As far as Lewis is concerned, southern New Mexico has everything it needs here to create the perfect environment for a thriving film industry. He points out that CMI has more than 400 students enrolled this semester. CMT has close to 300.

Even more telling, according to Lewis, is the fact that these young filmmakers have the right attitude. Rather than wait for somebody to hire them or give them money, they're out there, every single day, doing what they love: making movies.



Las Cruces Bulletin photo by Mark Wark

**Filmmakers, legislators, studio executives, film commissioners and unions came together to discuss the future at Film & Media Day, held Friday, Feb. 22 in Santa Fe.**

"Las Cruces is very different than any other place in the nation," he said. "Filmmakers here feed each other. We are all colleagues. We have all worked together. We've all donated money, or acted or were part of the crew with each other. So we are all supporting each other. I think that's key."

One local filmmaker who exemplifies this vision is Kent Harkey, a former CMT student now working as producer/director of video production at Wilson Binkley Advertising &

Marketing. Harkey and a group of local filmmakers have banded together with the goal of filming a project a week for an entire year. Some may call it ambitious, but Harkey and his cohorts, Dustin Richardson and Rick Hretz, believe that it is entirely possible, owing in large part to the phenomenon voiced by Lewis.

"It's only because of groups like SODA (Student Organization of Digital Artists) and Film Las Cruces, with big help from the Film

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## Film

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Liaison that any of this is possible," Harkey said. "It's only because we're all connected together by the same network of people that anything we do is possible. It's always a group effort."

The end goal, according to Harkey is 52 short films by the end of the year, hence the working title of the project: LC 52. A month and a half in, they're still on track.

"I really think that one of the positive things about this project is it really pushes us to make do with what we actually have to work with and inspires that kind of indie creativity that is so special," he said.

Another group of students — Julian Alexander, Keagan Karnes and Jon Foley — has just finished their latest project, "For Future Reference," which was made with ingenuity, tenacity and a fundraising campaign through crowdfunding source IndieGoGo.

What started out as a student thesis has grown to become something more. In true indie fashion, the young filmmakers used money raised through the campaign to seek out and hire professional actors to play the principal roles, thus raising the stakes considerably. The rest of the roles, along with the crew, were made up of local talent.

"There's a certain sense of professionalism that you want to have, even when you're working with your friends," said Alexander, producer for the film. "But when you have these people who work in the industry coming in, you kind of just do it automatically. You can always joke around with your friends, but it's nice being able to feel like you're doing something bigger than what you're used to."

## Wages

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by our workers," she said.

Nolan said locally owned businesses pay a median wage of \$8.11, which she said is higher than the larger, national companies pay.

She said that while Las Cruces has the third highest number of private sector employees in New Mexico, take-home pay for private sector workers is ninth in the state.

"Our workers in Las Cruces deserve a fair wage for their hard work," she said. "Now is a better time than any."

Nolan said increasing the minimum wage would inject \$67 million into the state economy, creating an additional 600 jobs.

"Studies in other parts of the country show that when low income people get an extra dollar they spend it," she said.

If the Las Cruces City Council puts a resolution on the minimum wage on the Monday, March 4, meeting agenda, CAFé will attend, she said.

Meanwhile, CAFé is focusing its energy on the state, sending teams to the state Legislature every week to lobby.

On Feb. 16, CAFé held a minimum wage rally in Las Cruces. Among attendees speaking with ABC-7 was Graciela Leyva, owner of Las Cruces' Welcome Inn Café, who said she disagrees with the contention that when wages go up employers cut down on employees.

"The same people are going to have more money to spend," Leyva told ABC-7. "I can pay a dollar more to my employees."

### State mulls multiple measures

Following the Feb. 16 rally in Las Cruces that supported a constitutional amendment to tie the minimum wage to the inflation rate, the measure failed to clear the House Voters and Elections Committee. House Joint Resolution 6 would have put the issue to a vote of the New Mexico electorate and circumvented the need for the governor to sign the measure into law.



Las Cruces Bulletin photo by Scott Corrigan

**Local filmmakers and students ply their trade on the set of "For Future Reference," which was partially funded through an aggressive IndieGoGo campaign.**

The result is a 15-minute short film that is being prepped for the film festival circuit, something that writer/director Karnes said, was the point all along.

The filmmakers behind "For Future Reference" are yet another example of what Lewis refers to as "the key."

"The community has been so good to us. If

they can just stay excited about what we're doing for six more months, I think that will help," Karnes said. "We just want as many people to hear about it as possible."

But what of the local professionals who didn't start out as CMI or CMT students? People such as Brad Littlefield, Melissa Chambers and Tony Hernandez, film professionals who see the value of their surroundings and are making filmmaking a business, right here in Las Cruces.

Littlefield, the founder and driving force behind Open Range Pictures, splits his time between his office at the Arrowhead Center business incubator on the NMSU campus and another office in Los Angeles, within walking distance of Paramount Studios. His dream is to create a cohesive film industry in Las Cruces, pulling together all of the diverse resources available here into one powerful entity, he said.

"You know, my social contract with the community is to create jobs and economic development here, so that we can grow and expand in terms of our crew base and our ability to attract bigger productions," he said.

His latest endeavor has him joining forces with Chambers and Hernandez and bringing in his friend and collaborator Samir Banerjee to begin production on a feature film this March with the working title "The Runaway."

### Restaurant impact debated

Jerry Harrell, general manager of the Double Eagle, said although the restaurant's employees already make above \$8.50 an hour, he opposes HB550 to raise tipped wages from \$2.13 to \$3.25.

He said the current arrangement in which customers do the tipping seems to be working, but an increase in wages would increase restaurants' costs of doing business by 25 percent. Passing that cost on to the customer would result in "a really big jump in prices," he said.

"I don't have a problem with raising the minimum wage (to \$8.50)," Harrell said. "But raising the tipped wage would make a difference to restaurants."

Harrell said the only winner would be government, which would collect more taxes.

He said rather than raise the minimum wage or rely on an earned income tax credit to aid struggling workers, he would favor programs such as education, training and direct assistance, including food stamps if they're needed, "to help directly the people who need it."

"If you point everybody with the same brush, you're going to waste a lot of paint," he said.

"I like to pitch 'The Runaway' as sort of the archetypal homage to the American road movie," he said. "This is a small production with no studio backing, but I am working on distribution and we are planning a modest theatrical release, as well as concurrent DVD release."

As for Banerjee, a native of India who has made his career doing music videos and feature films in Europe and South Asia, the realization of this film is a dream come true.

"Las Cruces has got a flavor of a lot of different elements that work for a road movie," he said. "Since I've known Brad, he's talked about New Mexico. I've never traveled to the south-west, but now I'm here and it is even better than I imagined. It's brilliant."

"I think what's really cool is that this is shaping up to be a really international production," Littlefield said. "We have a director of Indian heritage, our cinematographer is of Japanese heritage, our assistant director is coming in from Moscow. Our lead is Filipino-American. We've got a truly international mix coming here. I've been joking with people that this film is Hollywood meets Tamales!"

With news of the feature film "Enemy Way" shooting in Deming this April and several more large productions expressing interest in the area, all the hard work appears to be paying off.

Wark sees all of this as a natural progression. It's why he made the trek to Santa Fe and lobbied to raise southern New Mexico's profile alongside Lewis, Littlefield, Chambers and other local filmmakers.

"The message was received loud and clear," he said. "Las Cruces has a talented and capable filmmaking workforce. The Las Cruces film community is emerging and coming into its own. While it is true a part of that success is borne out of the fact Las Cruces has the ideal weather for year round filming, it could be argued that a larger part of this new success is due to our ever present and growing independent film community. Nowhere in the New Mexico is it stronger and more alive than in Las Cruces."

By all accounts, the filmmaking industry in Las Cruces and southern New Mexico is growing as a whole. Could it benefit from a decision to raise the tax credit or revise the cap? Everybody in the Las Cruces film community agrees that it would be a boon, but in the end Phil Lewis sums it up best.

"If people are reading the newspaper and waiting for the Legislature to flip the switch on the industry down here, they're completely out of touch," he said. "The lights are already on. The cameras are already rolling. They're rolling here in Las Cruces, they're rolling in Roswell and Deming and Portales and Silver City. It's happening all around us and it's happening our way. It has nothing to do with government subsidies or Santa Fe."

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employment effect on low-skilled workers," McGonagle said.

The crux of the economic argument is whether raising wages creates or destroys jobs.

But Reich contends there's another piece of the puzzle.

In answer to the question of whether markets should be free to decide what people are paid, Reich wrote that markets exist within societies, and societies regularly set minimum standards, such as those for worker safety.

Advocating raising the national minimum from \$7.25 an hour to \$9, Reich stated: "A decent society would do no less."

So what's right for New Mexico? It's clear the state has more than its share of families that are struggling financially.

In a January report, "New Mexico's

Wage Race to the Bottom," New Mexico Voices for Children wrote that 44 percent of New Mexico's working families are low income — the highest in the nation.

That they — and we — have a problem is clear to me. The solution, not so much.

In the past few weeks, I've heard economists and business owners with various perspectives on the minimum wage say their peace about it and then go on to stress the importance of education and training so the state can attract high-paying, highly skilled jobs.

Maybe they're on to something. The current debate on the minimum wage masks underlying issues that will continue to have an impact on New Mexico's economy.

Beyond the minimum wage debate, citizens and legislators need to ask what a smart — and decent — society would do to create a better path forward so future entrepreneurs and workers can perform at the highest level in a global economy.

New Mexico is waiting.

## Proposals spark local debate

### Las Cruces split on minimum wage

By **Alta LeCompte**  
Las Cruces Bulletin

A divided Las Cruces community is speaking out in favor of and in opposition to proposals to raise the state minimum wage.

Among the voices heard locally are those of the Hispano Chamber of Commerce de Las Cruces, which opposes minimum wage increase this year, and CAFé (New Mexico Communities in Action and Faith), which backs an increase.

Hispano Chamber President Kirk Clifton on Friday, Feb. 15, addressed a letter to the governor, southern New Mexico legislators, sponsors of the proposed legislation and local governments on behalf of the board of directors in opposition to raising the hourly minimum from \$7.50 to \$8.50.

"Given the current conditions of the local, regional and national economy, now is not the time to further burden the very backbone of

our economy," he wrote.

In his letter, Clifton postulated the \$1 increase would not help a household of one, since that household already would be above the poverty level. At the other end of the spectrum, he wrote, the proposed increase would not boost the family of four out of poverty.

"Although the assumption is being made that these increased wages will put money back into the economy, there are neither studies nor evidence that it would have any impact," he wrote.

The letter stated, "The Hispano Chamber and its many constituents cannot support this legislation as the increase will continue to burden and damage small businesses throughout the region."

In the letter, Clifton wrote that the chamber's board "deliberated the proposed legislation and overwhelmingly does not support it."



CLIFTON



NOLAN

### CAFé challenges Hispano Chamber

Sarah Nolan, director of CAFé, a nonpartisan 501(c)(3), took issue with the Hispano Chamber's approach and the content of its message.

"As a member of the Hispano Chamber, I can tell you they didn't ask their members if this was something we should consider more deeply," she said.

"Ask a family if \$40 a week doesn't make a difference with regards to groceries and school supplies."

Nolan said an increase in the minimum wage would most directly affect Las Cruces women in their 40s who have children.

She said 8,000 people in Las Cruces have private sector jobs and their average income is \$20,000. Most lower-wage employees work for businesses with more than 100 employees, many owned by large national corporations.

"Our local businesses already are doing well

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