Board meets privately on living wage
Ad Hoc committee, pressed to write proposal, considers wage plan and tradeoffs

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The members of the Board of Managers have met to discuss the possible implementation of a living wage at Swarthmore, but the student body will not find out what they said.

Two weeks ago, amid discussions of campus construction, endowment and intellectual property, the board convened and debated the idea of a living wage at Swarthmore. The board asked the student and faculty observers to leave, as well as the co-chairs of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Living Wage, who had just made a presentation to the board.

Anna Morgan '04 and Emiliano Rodriguez '06, who as Student Council co-presidents were invited to observe the board's proceedings Sept. 19 and 20, said in a reserved-student email that they were concerned "as to the confidential nature of the Board discussion regarding the living wage."

"It is an issue of extreme relevance and importance to the campus community, and it would be contrary to the mission and purpose of our institution if such a discussion was not transparent," one statement said.

President Al Bloom defended the board's right to privacy. "From time to time, the board, just like any other group — for example, the faculty or students — takes the opportunity to discuss issues on its own," he said. "In fact, at every board meeting, there is an executive session for that purpose."

Bloom added that "the board felt that it needed some time to discuss the issue of a living wage in a context which makes comfortable free exploration of ideas and expression of opinions."

"Even with everyone wanting to come up with a proposal for a living wage, it would be irresponsible to ignore the complexity of the matter," Prof. Barry Schwartz said.

Pushing for a proposal
The Living Wage and Democracy Campaign conducted a letter-writing campaign the day the Board of Managers began its meeting, asking students to encourage the Ad Hoc Committee on a Living Wage to make a recommendation in time for the board to discuss it at its next meeting in early December.

The committee, created by Bloom in the fall of 2002, is charged with devising a plan and budget for paying Swarthmore employees at least $9.50 an hour, a level that would allow them to "live" in a typical student household, based on necessary expenses such as food, rent and transportation.

The committee, which has been holding monthly meetings, has already decided to raise the minimum wage for all student employees to $8.75 an hour by Aug. 1, 2003, a decision that "wouldn't be a problem if we had the resources," Schwartz said.

The committee has been held back recently, Schwartz said, because six out of eight student and faculty members left last year. "There has to be a little bit of backtracking if you have so many new people on the committee," he said.

"I just don't think we can have a report by the end of fall break. I know how much we don't have resolved," Schwartz said.

He pointed out that it had taken the committee three months of weekly meetings to come up with a living wage for Swarthmore. "The issues are unbelievably complicated," he said. "Even with everyone wanting to come up with a proposal for a living wage, it would be irresponsible to ignore the complexity of the matter."

"The only reason that we didn't give them to the committee was an oversight," Schwartz said.

Two of the documents were "arguments against a living wage," Bradbury said. The committee's charter had told members to work under the assumption that increasing the minimum wage rate would be "prudent and right," and the president had directed the committee to focus on how to implement a living wage, not whether to.

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October 2, 2003
Behind closed doors, board discusses living wage

Those supporting the living wage proposal were relieved to hear the news that the college’s board of trustees had voted to implement it. The decision was made after months of debate and procedural requirements were satisfied.

Implementation of the living wage will begin with a list of employees who are currently paid below the living wage. The college will conduct a comprehensive review of the compensation of all employees and adjust wages as necessary to meet the new standard.

The living wage will be implemented in phases, starting with the lowest paid employees and working up to those in higher positions. The college is committed to ensuring that all employees are paid a living wage by the end of the fiscal year.

The implementation of the living wage is expected to have a positive impact on the community, as well as on the college’s workforce. Employees who are paid a living wage are more likely to be able to afford basic necessities, such as housing, food, and healthcare. This, in turn, can lead to improvements in employee satisfaction and retention.

The college is also committed to ensuring that the living wage is sustainable in the long-term. This includes ongoing review and adjustment of the wage standards to account for changes in the cost of living and other factors.

The implementation of the living wage is a positive step towards creating a more equitable and just community. The college is proud to be a leader in this important issue and looks forward to working with all stakeholders to ensure that everyone benefits from this new standard.