

# Hold the applause for the \$15 minimum-wage experiment

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Seattle Times illustration

**An activist state Supreme Court greenlights a \$15 wage at Sea-Tac International Airport.**

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

*The Seattle Times*

A \$15 minimum-wage experiment at Sea-Tac International Airport got official clearance for takeoff from the state Supreme Court. A bare majority of the nine justices last week sided with labor and social-justice advocates in a challenge to the voter-approved wage hike.

Absent a new appeal, the City of SeaTac law will take effect shortly. Some impacts won't immediately be clear. An estimated 4,700 airport workers should get a quick bump up to \$15 an hour. That should help them ease the distress of low-wage work in an increasingly expensive corner of the country.

One other immediate effect is clear: The Supreme Court flexed its ideological muscle to reach what appears to be a predetermined conclusion in favor of \$15.

To reach it, the court had to rule on whether a SeaTac wage law was applicable to the airport, which is owned and managed by a different municipal jurisdiction — the Port of Seattle.

[The majority opinion](#) authored by Justice Susan Owens, interpreted a state law that awards the Port “exclusive jurisdiction and control” over the airport to be ambiguous — although a plain reading of the law suggests it is unambiguous. Justice Debra Stephens noted that dissonance in a dissenting opinion signed by four justices.

The court’s majority also waded into micromanagement of the airport, deciding a higher wage had no effect on “airport operations.” How could the justices actually know that?

Other impacts of the \$15 experiment — particularly [Seattle’s more gradual rise](#) in the wage floor — are as clear as mud. Despite cheerleading from labor and advocates, it is too early to weigh the ultimate consequences of a huge increase that won’t fully take effect in Seattle until 2019.

The cheerleaders see the opening of a few pizza parlors or pho shops in Seattle, during a boom economy, as definitive proof that higher wages are no impediment to business. That is selective analysis.

**“Cheers for the airport workers and their raises. But hold the Champagne until the ripple effects of \$15 are actually felt.”**

What’s needed are hard data. A research team at [the University of Washington](#) is working on that, talking with hundreds of businesses and dozens of workers. The team, led by UW professor Jacob Vigdor, will be charting wages, hours worked, use of the social safety net and the adaptive capacity of small businesses. Vigdor himself said it’s too early to determine what impact the law has had.

Cheers for the airport workers and their raises. But hold the Champagne until the ripple effects of \$15 are actually felt.

*Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Ryan Blethen, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, Thanh Tan, Blanca Torres, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).*