

Seattle Times

## Local facts no match for national fiction on \$15 minimum-wage issue

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Getting your ideological cause to trip from the lips of Rush Limbaugh is think-tank gold — even when it's completely false.

Now that the conservative media's bogus story about the minimum wage killing off Seattle restaurants has been thoroughly debunked, it's tempting to say the truth won out. That this time, anyway, facts trumped misinformation.

I don't think so.

"I've been hearing from people all over the country that I closed my restaurant because of the minimum wage," says Renee Erickson, owner of Boat Street Café and three other Seattle restaurants. "I'm hearing from high-school friends I haven't seen in 25 years. They're all wondering 'What's going on in Seattle?'"

If you didn't follow this story this past week, it went like this: A local lifestyle magazine lamented in early March about the announced closings of four — count 'em, four — Seattle restaurants that are particularly beloved by foodies. The article said none of them were closing due the new minimum-wage law that takes effect April 1, but included some generic paragraphs about other restaurateurs worrying about the new law.

Pretty ho-hum stuff. But then a local, business-backed "think tank," the Washington Policy Center, wrote a blog post that translated all this into ["Seattle's \\$15 wage law a factor in restaurant closings."](#) It also cited a completely unsupported "rising trend in restaurant closures."

Still no big deal. Until three days later, when the American Enterprise Institute picked it up. The AEI is the granddaddy of all conservative think tanks in Washington, D.C. [It reported](#) — and I use that term so loosely it's hanging by a thread from this sentence — that "already the city has seen a number of restaurant closings and job losses related to the government-mandated wage hike." It referred to Seattle as having "an economic death wish."

At that point the story exploded across the crazysphere, getting more ludicrous with each telling. In the New York Post we were ["Jobless in Seattle."](#) In the Washington Times, it was ["Blue-state Businesses on Endangered Species List."](#) Finally Rush Limbaugh out-bloviated them all, as is his wont, lowering the boom with ["Seattle Libs Kill Restaurant Industry."](#)

Of course, you can scarcely walk down a street in this town without tripping over a "restaurant opening" sign. But in much of America — Limbaugh has 13.5 million daily listeners — they must think we're surviving solely on our backyard goats and parking-strip gardens.

In any case, it's all been debunked, as the restaurateurs themselves were interviewed and said [the minimum wage had nothing to do with it](#). Erickson, for example, noted she's opening new restaurants this year, is a supporter of the \$15 minimum wage, and already pays her employees above what the new phased-in wage schedule calls for, so it couldn't have had any effect on her decision-making.

"I'm a Seattle lib," she told me. "And you can tell Rush Limbaugh that what I'm doing is growing the restaurant industry."

But here's the thing: Rush obviously doesn't care. In fact, at week's end none of the news outlets or think tanks cited above had corrected the record. The local Washington Policy Center even doubled down, [bizarrely insisting](#) against all firsthand evidence that it somehow had it right all along.

"It isn't right," Erickson told me. "I'm so irritated at being used like this. If I was bothered by the minimum-wage law, why would I be opening new restaurants here? They're just making things up about my business to scare people."

Here's the other thing: It works. It's a feature of the entire think tank to right-wing press Wurlitzer. The left has one of these, too — though without the Limbaugh-sized megaphone at the end.

While I'm sure it's preferable if the stories being churned through these Wurlitzers are true, what's fascinating is that it doesn't really matter. Local facts don't have much power against national fiction.

This bogus story is now out there, and if you Google "Seattle" and "\$15 minimum wage" what you get is a mishmash of headlines about restaurants here going dark and some sort of equivocating ["rumpus"](#) over whether it's true this \$15 wage thing is a slow-motion disaster.

It used to be said the lie was halfway around the world before the truth put on its boots — implying the truth might eventually catch up and shame the lie. Now the lie doesn't seem to care about the truth one way or another.

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