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EDITORIALS

Soften the blow to Chicago employers, Mayor Lightfoot

An ordinance scheduled for the full City Council next week will present Mayor Lori Lightfoot with an opportunity to prove she takes seriously Chicago's business community.

Will she be a voice for the city's job creators? Or join in the book-throwing?

The council is poised to vote on an ordinance that would create new, sweeping regulations for employers by controlling how they schedule their employees' hours. Restaurants, hotels, hospitals, manufacturers, retail stores — industries with hours that can be less predictable than those for office jobs — would be required starting in April 2020 to adhere to strict scheduling rules. The rules would reduce flexibility for both employers and employees, even in fields where some workers prefer getting called on short notice to work. Yes, there are cashiers and bartenders who actually like a more fluid schedule — and extra hours.

Add this to the City Council's constant march toward regulation and other local disadvantages — a higher minimum wage in Chicago than in surrounding states, higher workers' compensation costs, higher sales and property taxes, new requirements for mandatory employee sick time — and you can see why employers find Chicago an increasingly hostile place to do business.

Under a draft of the ordinance, employers would have to post work schedules at least two weeks out. An increase or a reduction in posted hours could result in employer penalties. Schedule changes would be regulated and memorialized in writing; employees could turn down requests to pitch in extra hours; and companies could be fined for noncompliance.



JOSE M. OSORIO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot speaks to the news media earlier this month.

It's the ultimate intrusion of government in the workplace. Can't a nursing supervisor decide how best to staff an emergency room? Or a banquet hall manager how best to staff a funeral luncheon? Do we want aldermen making those decisions? No.

Yet any deviation from the aldermen's mandates could result in companies getting slapped with fines.

The ordinance so far covers employers with 100 or more employees, and nonprofits with 250 or more workers. For the restaurant industry, restaurants with 30 or

more global locations and 250 or more employees, along with chain-type and fast-food restaurants, would be impacted.

But here's the egregious Chicago angle: The ordinance would be far more sweeping than similar ordinances in other major U.S. cities. Rather than write a narrow statute to help lower-paid, hourly workers in select industries predict their schedules, the proposed ordinance also covers salaried employees earning less than \$50,000 a year. Unlike the other cities with similar ordinances, Chicago's proposal covers numerous fields, including health care,

where last-minute staffing can be a matter of public safety.

Back off, City Hall.

An employer coalition opposing the ordinance already has agreed to concessions, including posting work schedules two weeks out. But the group also wants the ordinance to allow for "voluntary standby lists" for emergencies. The lists would be made up of workers who want extra hours, and who voluntarily submit to being called upon for added shifts, without triggering paperwork and penalties. It isn't too much to ask. So far, the ordinance's chief sponsor, Ald. Susan Sadlowski Garza, 10th, has not agreed to that language.

How about a pilot program: Delay the ordinance. Let the employers have 24 months to give workers the two-week predictability in scheduling. And give the voluntary standby lists a try. If these things work, fine. If not, the council can revisit this much more draconian proposal.

Keep in mind Chicago's restaurant and hotel sectors, by and large, are humming along just fine with current industry norms. Employees work out shift changes among themselves. If someone calls in sick, a manager picks up the phone and starts looking for a replacement. Bad actors who abuse employee flexibility can and should be addressed.

But this ordinance, as proposed, is overkill. City Hall should not be interfering in shift changes at Northwestern Memorial Hospital or the Marriott or Taco Bell.

If City Hall has to put its nose between employers and workers, the arrangement should be more balanced. It's up to Mayor Lightfoot to make that happen.