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Feeling the pinch

Income gap underscores high cost of living in Chico

by
Evan Tuchinsky
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Marina Vega works hard to live in Chico. She's been here since 1992, moving from Los Angeles to be close to family, and got her first job in 1996 at Chico Nut sorting almonds. She worked for some of the most recognizable companies in Butte County—Mooney Farms, Lundberg Family Farms, Sierra Nevada Brewing Company—before taking her current position as store cleaner for S&S Organic Produce and Natural Foods.

That was 11 years ago. Ten years ago, Vega started house-

cleaning on the side to supplement her income. She now cleans nine houses and one office a week on top of her weeknight shifts at S&S.

Money is a concern in her household, which includes her boyfriend of four years. He is a tree-cutter who contributes but also supports his family in Mexico. Vega, who emigrated from Mexico as a teen in 1979, has four adult children, one who's deaf and lives with her.

"We worry [about] how we can do it," she said, seated in the living room of her campus-area home. "And sometimes I get cancellations on the houses, so it's hard for me."

At S&S, Vega earns a couple

dollars an hour over minimum wage. The mortgage on her house, which she bought in 2005, is roughly half her take-home pay after deductions for taxes and health insurance. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, affordable housing should take no more than 30 percent of gross income, including utilities.

Of course, she has other living expenses—"extra bills all of the time"—which have continued to climb over the years.

Nonetheless, Vega has no intention of leaving S&S or Chico. She likes her boss and workplace. She likes the community, where two brothers, three of her children and her grandson