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**MINIMUM WAGE**

## Supporters of an increase call it 'a moral issue'

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Workers earning the minimum wage in Kentucky would see their pay jump to \$7 an hour, a 36 percent increase over the current rate, under legislation proposed for this session.

The increase, part of House Bill 17 filed by Rep. J.R. Gray, D-Benton, also would apply to waiters, waitresses and other employees who earn tips. Employers now can pay those workers \$2.13 an hour as long as tips bring their overall pay to at least the current hourly minimum of \$5.15. That rate, set by the federal government, hasn't changed since 1997.

"There's been a renewed interest in it, not only in Kentucky but nationwide," Gray said. "It's become a moral issue."

As of Friday, there were at least four other proposals for more modest changes to Kentucky's wage laws.

One of them, HB 54, would raise the minimum to \$5.85 an hour with additional increases in 2008 and 2009. Rep. Mary Lou Marzian, D-Louisville, a co-sponsor of the bill, said she favors an immediate hike to the \$7-an-hour level but is skeptical an increase that large would pass the Republican-controlled Senate.

Rep. Tom Riner, another Louisville Democrat, has filed HB 37 to raise the minimum to \$6.15 an hour, but he said he doubts any wage legislation will make it to the Senate floor.

Senate President David Williams, R-Burkesville, said last November that the federal government should decide the issue. Lourdes Baez-Schrader, a spokeswoman for Williams, said that stance hasn't changed.

Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia already have approved wages greater than the \$5.15 federal minimum. The U.S. House and Senate have approved a plan to raise the federal level to \$7.25 an hour but haven't agreed on proposed tax breaks for businesses that are part of the legislation.

Egbert Joseph, who owns King's Fast Food at 2101 W. Broadway, said he might have to lay off employees if the state or federal efforts succeed.

"You can't raise your food prices 40 percent to compensate," said Joseph, whose take-out restaurant offers chicken, fish and barbecue.

Tony Palombino, founder of Louisville-based Tony BoomBozz Pizzeria, said his employees average \$7 to \$7.50 an hour, a level that he said keeps turnover low. If the minimum goes up, Palombino said he might consider a comparable wage hike so his workers can continue to make more than they would at other chains.

"That's the philosophy that I've always believed in and lived by," he said. "If we take care of our employees, they'll take care of us."

All of the proposals before the Kentucky legislature would allow the federal wage to kick in if it is higher.

Ed Monahan, executive director of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky, called a minimum-wage hike a matter of "social justice."

The Rev. Nancy Jo Kemper, executive director of the Kentucky Council of Churches, agreed. "Even if a majority of minimum-wage earners are teenagers, there is a moral floor below which we ought not go," she said.

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