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GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Senate OKs higher minimum wage

MEASURE WOULD RAISE WAGE TO \$7.25 HOUR OVER NEXT TWO YEARS

By John Stamper
HERALD-LEADER FRANKFORT BUREAU

FRANKFORT - Nearly 200,000 low-income workers moved closer to a major pay raise yesterday as the Republican-controlled Senate overwhelmingly approved a measure that would raise Kentucky's minimum hourly wage from \$5.15 to \$7.25 over the next two years.

Advocates for low-income workers celebrated the Senate's 33-1 vote, which could lead to the state's first minimum-wage increase in a decade and make Kentucky the 31st state with a higher minimum wage than the federal one.

"They're not going to get rich, but any amount over \$5.15 an hour is certainly helpful," said Pat Delahanty, associate director of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky. "To not pay somebody a just wage is theft, and \$5.15 is no longer a just wage in this nation."

Between 180,000 and 200,000 Kentuckians currently are paid less than the proposed minimum wage, Delahanty said.

The bill has already passed the Democratic-controlled House, which must now consider an amendment related to economic-development incentives that was tacked on by the Senate.

House Speaker Jody Richards, D-Bowling Green, predicted the House will approve the amended measure and send the bill to Gov. Ernie Fletcher for his signature.

Jodi Whitaker, Fletcher's press secretary, declined to say whether Fletcher, a Republican, supports the bill. She issued a statement saying only that "we will evaluate the bill when it comes to the governor's desk."

Kentucky AFL-CIO President Bill Londrigan, who has clashed with Fletcher on a number of issues in recent years, said his union "urges Gov. Ernie Fletcher to sign this immediately."

House Bill 305 raises the minimum wage to \$5.85 an hour beginning July 1, then to \$6.55 an hour in July 2008 and \$7.25 an hour in July 2009. The House approved it Feb. 21.

Republican Sen. Dick Roeding of Lakeside Park cast the only dissenting vote in the Senate. Republican Sens. Julie Denton of Louisville, Vernie McGaha of Russell Springs, Katie Stine of Fort Thomas and Damon Thayer of Georgetown were absent for the vote, although they were present for later votes on other issues.

The changes made to the bill by the Senate would allow companies participating in economic-development projects to pay their employees a minimum of 150 percent of the current federal minimum wage, instead of 150 percent of the new, higher state minimum wage. It applies to projects approved by the Cabinet for Economic Development through July 2008.

During debate, Senate Majority Floor Leader Dan Kelly said raising the minimum wage must be done "from time to time," but that the only way to improve the incomes of most Kentuckians is with improved education.

He urged the Democrat-controlled House to pass a Senate measure aimed at improving science and math education.

"We want to see folks make a wage that allows them the opportunity to have all the things they want for their family," Kelly said. "The only way we can do that is through education."

The Senate's action came despite earlier signals by Senate President David Williams that the legislature would not change the state's minimum wage. Williams said in January that he believes federal lawmakers should set a minimum

wage for all states.

Yesterday, Williams said he still thinks Congress will act to raise the federal minimum wage, but "I didn't want the members to leave here with the impression that we didn't care or we didn't want the minimum wage to be raised."

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