

Committee OKs quick minimum wage hike

By Walter Rubel

SANTA FE BUREAU CHIEF

SANTA FE — The House Labor and Human Resources Committee, on a 5-2 vote Thursday, endorsed a bill sponsored by Speaker of the House Ben Lujan, D-Santa Fe, that would increase the minimum wage to \$7.50 an hour.

Lujan's bill is one of three introduced this session that would increase the minimum wage. His would make the leap from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.50 all at once, and would include indexing to provide further increases in future years to keep pace with inflation.

Senate President pro tem Ben Altamirano, D-Silver City, has introduced a bill supported by Gov. Bill Richardson that would phase in the increase over three years and does not include indexing. Senate Majority Leader Michael Sanchez, D-Belen, has introduced a compromise bill

that would increase the rate all at once, but also includes a tax credit for small businesses of 25 employees or fewer.



Thursday's Labor Committee meeting was moved to the House Chambers to accommodate the number of people expected to comment on the bill. Several dozen people spoke for and against the bill

during a committee hearing that stretched on well into the evening.

Lujan told committee members that the increase was needed because the federal minimum wage has not been raised since 1997. Lujan said New Mexico ranks second in the nation for the number of people living below poverty, and people are not able to make ends meet with the current

minimum wage.

"People are making choices for the basics in life, and having to put food on the table," he said.

Gerry Bradley, an economist for the advocacy group Voices for Children, said there are 123,000 workers in New Mexico earning less than \$7.50, and the vast majority are adults.

"The additional \$5,000 that these families will earn will not even put them over the poverty level," he said.

Other advocates for the bill said that it would reduce poverty and strengthen families.

"If we deny the minimum wage increase, we're asking a parent to tell his child, 'mi hijo, can you wear your shoes for three more years?'" said Alan Sanchez, executive director for the New Mexico Conference on Catholic Bishops. "No, he'll outgrow them, and New Mexico has outgrown \$5.15."

Opponents of the measure said it would have unintended consequences — increasing prices and forcing employers to limit hiring.

"This is a frightening piece of legislation," said House Minority Leader Ted Hobbs, R-Albuquerque. "There's no question that if it passes it will cut jobs in the state, and cut the jobs of the people who are intended to be helped by this legislation."

Charlie Marquez, who represents chile growers throughout the state, said they did a study and found that a \$6.70 wage was the "breaking point."

"And by breaking point, I mean the point at which they go broke," he said.

Several business leaders said they could support the increase if it were phased in and they had time to prepare for it.

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