

House votes to raise minimum wage to \$9.25

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SANTA FE — The House voted 37-30 late Friday to approve a bill that would increase New Mexico's minimum wage — starting next year — from \$7.50 to \$9.25 per hour.

The state has not increased its minimum wage since 2009, and several wage-related bills have advanced during this year's 60-day legislative session. The Senate earlier this week passed a bill that would raise the minimum wage to \$9 an hour.

During Friday's debate, majority House Democrats described the bill as a compromise that would help low-income workers without crippling business owners.

"This is the No. 1 economic bill of the session," said Rep. Antonio "Moe" Maestas, D-Albuquerque. "It's not unreasonable."

But most House Republicans expressed concern that the measure, House Bill 442, could lead to fewer jobs in rural New Mexico and would also carry other unintended consequences.

"What we're doing with this minimum wage bill is creating less job opportunities for lower-skilled workers," said Rep. Larry Scott, R-Hobbs.

At one point during Friday's floor debate, House Minority Leader Nate Gentry, R-Albuquerque, tried to lessen the proposed wage increase to \$8.45 an hour, but his amendment was voted down.

Just one House Republican, Rep. Sarah Maestas Barnes of Albuquerque, voted in favor of the legislation. And just one Democrat, Rep. Candie Sweetser of Deming, voted against it.

Unlike the Senate-approved legislation, the bill passed Friday by the House would not allow businesses to pay a lower training wage during a worker's first two months on the job.

The House-passed bill would increase the wage for tipped employees, primarily waiters and waitresses, from \$2.13 an hour to \$3.70 an hour. The Senate bill would provide a raise of 50 cents an hour for tipped employees.

In addition, while the bill would not affect New Mexico cities — like Santa Fe — that already have local minimum wages higher than \$9.25 an hour, it would prohibit cities and counties from adopting laws that regulate how private employers can schedule their workers.

That provision has drawn opposition from some nonprofit groups, which argue that local governments deserve the right to protect low-wage workers who need predictable hours to make ends meet.

It's unclear whether Gov. Susana Martinez would sign the House-approved bill if it landed on her desk before the legislative session ends March 18.

The two-term Republican governor vetoed a 2013 bill that called for an \$8.50-an-hour minimum wage, and a spokesman was noncommittal earlier this week about the Senate-approved legislation.

"The governor supports raising the minimum wage as long as it's in line with neighboring states and doesn't hurt small businesses," Martinez spokesman Michael Lonergan said.

Both Arizona and Colorado currently have minimum wages in excess of \$9 per hour, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. However, the minimum wages of Texas, Oklahoma and Utah are all set at the federal minimum, \$7.25 per hour.

The bill is sponsored by five Democrats, including House Speaker Brian Egolf, D-Santa Fe.

In other action Friday at the Roundhouse, a proposal that would allow terminally ill patients in New Mexico to end their lives with help from doctors cleared its first test in the Senate.

The Democratic-controlled Senate Public Affairs Committee voted to move a bill opposed by the Catholic Church and Gov. Martinez. The measure would prevent doctors from facing prosecution for helping terminally ill patients end their lives.

Six other states and the District of Columbia allow residents to end their lives legally with medication prescribed by a physician.

In June, the New Mexico Supreme Court refused to overturn a state law preventing doctors from ending the lives of terminally ill patients.

New Mexico's assisted suicide law makes it a felony for doctors to end the life of a terminally ill patient.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.