

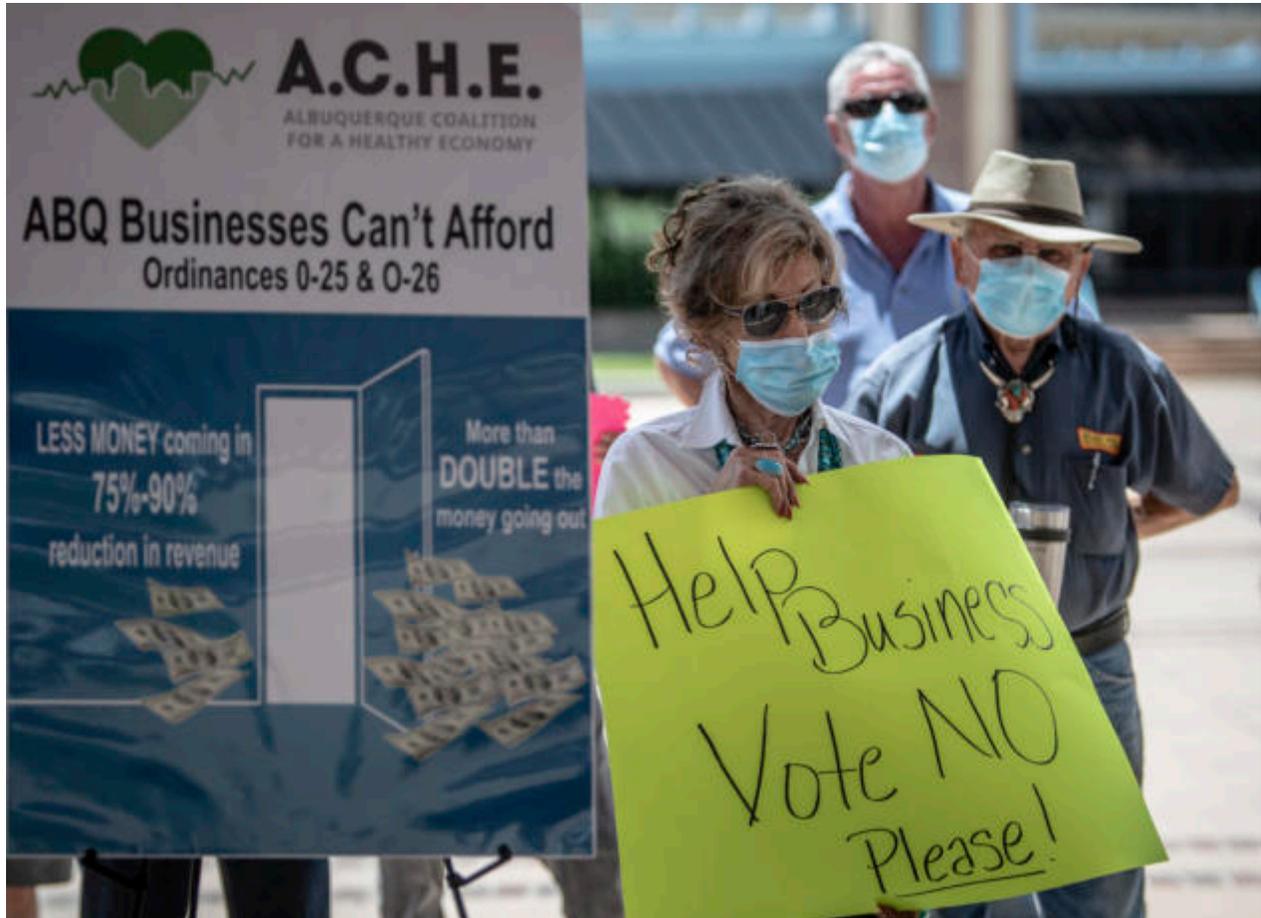
Council: Employers must supply masks

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Frontier Restaurant owner Dorothy Rainosek attended a rally urging councilors to vote no on a trio of ordinances under consideration Monday.

The Albuquerque City Council decided on Monday that employers must provide masks but not hazard pay to their workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As for paid sick leave? That still remains to be seen.

A trio of bills offering worker protections during the pandemic each got a different result during a special meeting of the council on Monday night.

Legislation that would have required essential businesses with at least 50 workers to give “premium pay” to workers who make \$12 or less an hour generated one of the longest debates during the 6½-hour session. But it ultimately failed on a 2-7 vote, with only its sponsors, Isaac Benton and Lan Sena, voting in favor.

The duo also co-sponsored a paid sick leave bill that had been scheduled for action Monday. They ended up withdrawing it – in part due to a procedural issue involving insufficient notification – but said they plan to bring it back when the council reconvenes in August.

Their original bill included an emergency pandemic provision requiring workers to get up to 80 hours of paid sick leave this year. But it also created a permanent paid-sick leave mandate beginning Jan. 1.

Benton said in an interview after the meeting that he wants to split the bill and pursue the pandemic provision again in August.

“I’m not giving up on that,” he said. “I think that’s a pretty important thing to highlight. The nice thing about that is for the most part it’s covered by the federal government.”

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act, in effect since April 1, already requires companies with under 500 workers to provide paid leave for COVID-related reasons, and reimburses the costs via tax breaks.

Benton said he still supports permanent paid sick leave but that he was still evaluating how to tackle that moving forward.

Several previous attempts to create an Albuquerque mandate have failed, though Bernalillo County passed a paid leave ordinance last year for the unincorporated areas of the county.

Benton and Sena did score on one of their worker protection proposals Monday – a mask-related bill they co-sponsored with Cynthia Borrego. The council unanimously passed the ordinance mandating that businesses require employees to wear masks and that they provide them to their workforce.

It also makes businesses post signage alerting customers that they must wear masks, though it does not require the companies to confront clients who do not comply.

“It’s unfortunate sometimes we have to pass this sort of language, but there’s a lot of people who don’t take this COVID seriously,” Borrego said.

The council supported the bill by allocating \$1 million to purchase personal protective equipment for businesses with 50 or fewer employees.

A series of amendments reduced the penalty for noncompliance with the mask provision. Businesses would get only a warning for the first infraction, and the penalty would be \$50 per occurrence thereafter.

The mask bill was the least controversial of the three bills Benton and Sena originally introduced June 15.

The premium pay and paid sick leave bills had drawn fierce backlash from business groups and owners, who argued the ordinances would pile on costs for enterprises still recovering from COVID-19-related losses and closures.

Several councilors echoed those sentiments, saying that workers will lose too if businesses ultimately fail or move away.

“Would we rather keep people employed ... or try to force business owners who aren’t making money to pay those employees more?” Councilor Trudy Jones said. “It’s a simple decision. They’re going to let people go. They’re going to close their business. They are going to leave Albuquerque.”

But proponents argued the legislation provided critical benefits to the city’s lowest-paid workers, saying that many of them have been on the front lines of businesses that stayed open during the pandemic.

Sena said that many such workers are people of color and those who were already struggling to make ends meet before the pandemic and are now facing exposure to a potentially deadly virus that is greatly impacting minority communities.

“We should be investing in our workforce, in our lowest-income families, because they are being disproportionately impacted,” she said.

But Don Harris countered that such workers are the most vulnerable when businesses are struggling.

“They are also people who are most likely to get fired or most likely to lose their jobs because we interfered with the economy,” he said.

Though the council is meeting virtually and not offering in-person public comment, it did receive 364 pages of written comments ahead of the meeting.

Many businesses wrote to detail their objections, with the Baca family of Bueno Foods saying the premium pay and sick leave bills “would add expenses that exceed by far our business profitability in a normal year” and expressing fear that they couldn’t share the higher cost with customers because their clientele would

turn to “lower cost products from companies located in other parts of New Mexico or elsewhere.”