

Session Winds Up, Bringing Benefits For Working Class

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College students across Maryland can expect to save a few hundred dollars on this fall's tuition bills. By next year, bartenders in the state should be serving drinks in smoke-free establishments. And many low-wage employees doing contract work for the state should soon see a bump in their paychecks.

In ways big and small, the 90-day session of the General Assembly that ended at midnight Monday will affect the lives of everyday Marylanders.

The session marked the return of one-party rule, as Gov. Martin O'Malley, a Democrat, took over from Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., the state's first Republican governor in more than a generation, after winning the November election.

O'Malley campaigned on "kitchen table" issues affecting working-class Marylanders, and much of the agenda he pushed through the heavily Democratic legislature was intended to benefit them.

That included a freeze next year on in-state tuition at public universities and the nation's first statewide "living wage" law, which will require state contractors to pay their employees significantly more than the minimum wage.

O'Malley also pushed for a record \$400 million in school construction funding, a move that could result in fewer students attending classes in what the governor dubbed "temporary learning shacks," a reference to the growing number of trailers on schoolyards in the Washington suburbs and elsewhere.

"I am extremely proud of the progress we have made this session, working together, to make our state government work again for Maryland's middle-class families and improve our quality of life," O'Malley said.

The biggest disappointments of the session were in the area of health care.

Leaders of the House of Delegates fell short in their drive to double the state's tax on cigarettes to \$2 a pack to help pay for the largest expansion of subsidized health insurance in years in Maryland.

And on the final night of the session, a deal between state and county officials to save the financially troubled Prince George's County hospital system collapsed, which could force the relocation of hundreds of patients.

The biggest win for health advocates was the adoption of a statewide ban on smoking in bars and restaurants. In February, Maryland will join at least 18 other states and the District in restricting lighting up in public places to protect workers and patrons from secondhand smoke.

Amid the burst of activity, some lawmakers noted the state's long-term financial problems.

Maryland's bill for record investments in public education is rapidly coming due. The legislature passed a balanced budget for the coming fiscal year by relying heavily on the state's savings. But analysts project a \$1.5 billion deficit in the fiscal year beginning July 2008.

Lawmakers talked a good deal about the looming crisis, but they did little to prepare for it.

By most accounts, closing the shortfall will require spending cuts and tax increases. And as lawmakers seek new sources of revenue, Marylanders may get the opportunity to engage in slot machine gambling at racetracks.

Other solutions being floated include adding a penny to the state's sales tax, now 5 cents per dollar, and applying the tax to a range of services. That could mean paying more for a haircut or hiring someone to mow a lawn.

"We did nothing to fix the state's fiscal problems," said House Minority Leader Anthony J. O'Donnell (R-Calvert), predicting "mass tax increases" next year.

O'Malley and lawmakers have pledged some tough budget decisions by January, when the next legislative session is scheduled to start.

In the meantime, Marylanders will realize the consequences of many other decisions made in the past 90 days. Habitual truants, for instance, will find it more difficult to get learner's permits to drive.

In the waning hours of the session, the General Assembly also approved legislation to set up a court to issue sanctions against truant students in Prince George's, expanding a pilot program that served communities on the Eastern Shore. The court could order the student to attend school, perform community service or attend counseling, or could take other action.

Lawmakers' votes this session also could lead to changes in the soap Marylanders use to wash their dishes. A bill sent to O'Malley limits the amount of phosphorus allowed.

That was among several environmental bills whose effect will be felt in the coming years. Among the others: "clean cars" legislation that will impose tighter emissions standards on automobiles sold in Maryland.

Marylanders also will see several changes in the way elections are conducted.

Legislators moved Maryland's 2008 presidential primary up several weeks, required paper receipts to be provided at the polls (though they did not come up with a way to pay for this) and decided to seek voters' input on whether they should be allowed to vote early.

The most far-reaching change approved by lawmakers could affect the way the nation elects its presidents. Maryland voted to become the first state to bypass the electoral college, awarding its 10 electoral votes to the presidential candidate who wins the most votes nationally instead of statewide. The bill would take effect only if enough other states agree to do the same, effectively ensuring the president is elected by national popular vote.

But Senate President Thomas Mike V. Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) said, "I don't know if it will happen in my lifetime."

Staff writer Lisa Rein contributed to this report.

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