

Unemployment benefits sought for part-time workers

O'Malley also proposes to allow unions to collect fees from nonunion workers

By Julie Bykowicz

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Gov. Martin O'Malley wants to expand unemployment benefits to part-time workers and allow state unions to collect fees from employees not in a bargaining group - two labor items in his legislative package unveiled yesterday.

In a session that has the General Assembly grappling with a \$2 billion shortfall, few of the governor's two dozen initiatives cost money. Among the proposals are an effort to repeal the death penalty, legislation to prevent the Maryland State Police from spying on peaceful protest groups and a pair of bills to take guns away from people who are the subject of protective orders.

O'Malley is also asking lawmakers to adopt recommendations by a task force on growth and development, including adding new goals to the state's Smart Growth program and requiring local governments to track more information on development patterns.

One potentially costly initiative would give part-time workers unemployment benefits. State Labor Secretary Thomas E. Perez said the estimated \$16 million to pay for the expansion would come from the state's unemployment insurance trust fund, which he said yesterday was "in very good shape." Perez also said an O'Malley proposal addressing workplace fraud would offset the cost.

O'Malley, a Democrat, called the unemployment expansion a "way to help families hardest hit by the recession." Sen. Delores G. Kelley, a Baltimore County Democrat, proposed similar legislation last year.

Small businesses and restaurants have opposed part-time unemployment benefits, saying they would force employers to pay higher payroll taxes. Thirty states allow part-time workers to collect unemployment benefits, according to legislative analysts who examined Kelley's proposal last year.

Another O'Malley labor-related initiative would give state collective bargaining groups the ability to seek "service fees" from nonunion workers. The legislation would not require the fees, but it would allow unions to ask employees to vote on the issue.

Patrick Moran, Maryland director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the largest union for state workers, said collecting service fees "would allow us to better communicate with and advocate for working families."

He said that of the 30,000 state and higher education workers AFSCME represents, fewer than half of them pay dues. "It's a fairness issue," he said.

O'Malley, who was endorsed by AFSCME in 2006, proposed a similar measure in 2007. It never got a hearing in the Senate. State union members pay about \$9 to \$15 in dues per pay period, according to back-up materials for the 2007 legislation.