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Unemployment benefits, Preakness bill among first to hit governor's desk

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ANNAPOLIS — Bills to extend unemployment benefits to part-time workers and give the state authority to buy or seize the Preakness Stakes were authorized to become law Tuesday, as Gov. Martin O'Malley held his first bill signing after the midnight conclusion of this year's General Assembly session.

O'Malley approved the bills, both of which he had proposed during the session, along with nearly 170 other pieces of legislation passed by lawmakers this year. He is expected to hold two more signing events in coming weeks to conclude the activities of the session.

Also before the end of the session, the House and Senate both agreed to a deal that is intended to keep state driver's licenses valid as federal identification. The deal creates a two-tiered system, with the state issuing licenses that do not comply with federal rules to people who need to renew their licenses before 2015, but can't show that they are legally in the state.

After that time, all drivers will have to show that they are legally in the state to get a license. All new licenses will require legal presence this year.

The unemployment bill, which passed with relative ease this year after a narrow defeat in 2008, would make people eligible to collect unemployment when they are looking for part-time work. Before this year, workers were only eligible if they said they were looking for full-time employment.

Opponents of the bill had concerns that it could raise unemployment insurance rates, both for individual employers and across the state. Still, it gained wide support from lawmakers who believe it will have a mild effect on the state's unemployment reserves and will help workers. It also will help the state comply with some provisions of the federal stimulus package relating to unemployment.

"It was a very positive session for working men and working women," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., D-Calvert and Prince George's, a supporter of the bill. "No tax increases, and those who are part-time employees can now get unemployment benefits."

The Preakness bill loomed large over the last few days of the General Assembly session, after O'Malley proposed it a week ago. It would give the state power to buy the Preakness, Pimlico and Laurel horse racing tracks, and other properties owned by the Maryland Jockey Club, or seize the properties using eminent domain.

The properties are all owned by Magna Entertainment Corp., the Canadian company that is attempting to reorganize in U.S. bankruptcy court in Delaware. Many in the administration and General Assembly became concerned over the course of this year's session that the company's plan to auction its Maryland tracks in July could lead to the state losing the Preakness. The race, held at Pimlico in Baltimore, is the second leg of horse racing's Triple Crown.

O'Malley was coy Tuesday when asked about his plan for using the new power. He said he would do what needs to be done to keep the race, but did not say how he would determine his course of action.

As the session ended, the clock ran out on a number of proposals, many of which had stalled weeks ago but others that appeared to have some momentum.

The General Assembly did not move forward with a plan to expand the state's film production tax credit, which defrays some of the cost of making movies and television shows in the state. Many legislators pushed to remove the cap on spending on the program, but in the end, the state will be left with \$1 million for the program next year.

A Senate proposal to expand online sales tax collections died in committee as well. It would have changed the state's method of determining whether a retailer is in-state, adding a company's relationship with Maryland-based advertising affiliates as a factor.

A bill passed that seeks to give the Maryland Insurance Administration the authority to block Washington, D.C., from using Maryland premiums collected by CareFirst Inc. The company has an affiliate that covers parts of Maryland, Washington and Northern Virginia, and legislators grew concerned that a new district health expansion program could cost Marylanders.