



Unemployment bill is caught in logjam

ANDY ROSEN
Daily Record Business Writer

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ANNAPOLIS — With the 2008 legislative session moving inexorably toward Monday's midnight adjournment, the clock seemed to have run out on a proposal to allow workers to collect unemployment benefits if they are looking for part-time jobs. A similar bill passed the Senate weeks ago, but the House Economic Matters Committee could not break a 10-10 tie to get its version (HB 627) to the floor as lawmakers worked late into the evening.

Jason Perkins-Cohen, executive director of the Job Opportunities Task Force and a principal backer of the bill to provide unemployment benefits for workers seeking part-time jobs, said it was unfortunate that the measure failed. He said this was an important year to expand unemployment eligibility because the economy is slowing.

"It's a real loss for the families who can't wait another year," he said, expressing hope that the proposal would return in 2009.

Part-time workers are already eligible for some unemployment benefits, but they must be actively looking for full-time jobs. The bill would have allowed people to collect unemployment when looking for part-time employment.

The proposal had split the business community. Groups including the Maryland Chamber of Commerce supported it, and it also had the backing of the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation. Many argued that it would help the unemployment system better reflect a labor market that has changed since the state-run insurance program was created.

There are many more people working part time now than there were decades ago, said Susan R. Bass, chief of policy and planning for DLLR's Division of Unemployment Insurance.

Ellen Valentino, Maryland director of the National Federation of Independent Business, said the change would increase unemployment taxes for small businesses, some of whom have part-time work forces with high turnover. Her organization lobbied against the bill, and she said it would continue to do so in future years.

Still, she said the change may have fared better in different economic conditions.

"Tough issue, tough time," she said. "I'm confident that the proponents of this will be back, and I truly believe that if it had been different economic times, there would have been a different outcome."