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Bills would raise minimum wage

By Donna-Jo Webster, Capital News Service
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RICHMOND -- Virginians working for minimum wage might see an increase in their paychecks this year, if recently introduced bills before the General Assembly become law.

Two bills seek to raise the state's minimum wage above the federally mandated level. Both House Bill 539, introduced by Delegate Vincent F. Callahan Jr., R-34th, McLean, and Senate Bill 480, introduced by Sen. Charles J. Colgan, D-29th, Manassas, propose increases to Virginia's minimum wage of \$1 per year over the next three years. After 2009, raises would be tied to fluctuations in the Consumer Price Index.

"I think there is something almost criminal about paying less than a substantial wage," said Callahan, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. "Virginia is a very affluent state. If you're going to have a minimum wage, it should reflect the times."

Approximately 42,000 Virginia workers out of a work force of 3.6 million currently draw minimum wage for their jobs. The rate of \$5.15 per hour, set by the federal government, has remained unchanged since 1997.

The federal Fair Labor Standards Act allows for exemptions to the rule. Among others, waiters and similar restaurant personnel, casual baby-sitters, workers with disabilities, employees of newspapers with limited circulation and farm workers all can be paid less than the minimum.

Minimum wage typically is paid to employees who perform little or no skilled labor, some part-time workers or those just entering the job market. Callahan believes increasing the amount of pay for those workers would have a positive effect on Virginia's economy.

While raising the minimum sounds like a good idea to those earning it, others believe the effect may not be so positive.

Anthony Conyers, commissioner of the Virginia Department of Social Services, warned that raising the minimum wage could be a double-edged sword. Although it would "substantially benefit the working poor of Virginia," he said, it could also raise some workers above the threshold to receive government assistance, while still leaving them in need of such assistance.

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In addition to disqualifying Virginians from receiving assistance, some groups cite other reasons for not raising the minimum wage.

"We believe that getting before the federal government on the issue is a mistake," said Hugh Keogh, president and CEO of the Virginia Chamber of Commerce. "Small businesses will have to pay more, and putting more money into the labor force will mean putting less money back into the business."

New York State recently raised its minimum wage to \$6.75 an hour, while New Jersey pays \$6.15 an hour. The District of Columbia increased its minimum from \$6.60 to \$7 an hour on Jan. 1. There, the minimum is automatically set \$1 higher than the federal rate if the district's rate is the lower of the two.

Keogh said Virginia enjoys a competitive edge over other states because of a strong business climate to attract new trades and industries. Despite other states' initiatives, he believes raising Virginia's minimum wage would erode that edge.

But Callahan said minimum wage is not just a financial issue, but a moral one. He said it's up to Virginia to take care of its people.

"There are arguments against raising the minimum from some conservatives, that we should leave the wage up to the federal government," he said. "Some business groups say it might cost jobs. Why not make our own initiatives? Raising the minimum wage is the moral thing to do."

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