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Maryland eyes contractor living-wage bill

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ANNAPOLIS -- Maryland is moving ahead with plans to become the first state in the country to require a statewide living wage for state contractors.

The bill appeared doomed earlier in the term, but by yesterday lawmakers in the Democratic-controlled General Assembly and Gov. Martin O'Malley, a Democrat, appeared ready to move forward on the proposal. Also revived in the General Assembly's closing days was a move to get rid of the state's voting machines in favor of ones that leave a paper trail.

The last-minute shuffle on the living-wage measure comes after Mr. O'Malley met with top lawmakers to urge its passage.

He pressed the need for a living wage in January in his first address to lawmakers. And now it appears the lawmakers are ready to listen. Though neither chamber has taken up the bill, and a deadline has passed for bills to pass one chamber, legislative maneuvering on nearly any measure is possible until the session ends Monday at midnight.

"We're the guardians of the working family," said Sen. Thomas McLain "Mac" Middleton, a Charles County Democrat who leads the committee considering the wage bill. "You've got to put your money where your mouth is."

Asked what changed on a bill that appeared all but dead, he cited a recent meeting with Mr. O'Malley; House Speaker Michael E. Busch, Anne Arundel Democrat; and Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., Southern Maryland Democrat.

"When you get all the lions, the giants, lined up, things can really move forward," he said.

That was clear a few moments later in a House committee that previously held the living-wage bill. When it met yesterday, Mr. O'Malley's top legislative aide was on hand, talking with Delegate Derrick Davis, Prince George's County Democrat and chairman of the committee.

The governor wants some sort of living-wage bill passed this year, said Joseph C. Bryce, Mr. O'Malley's chief legislative officer.

"In his opinion, it's important that when the state contracts for a service, that it pays a wage people can feed their families on," he said. "You shouldn't be in a position where you're working full time for the state and you're still on food stamps."

Mr. Davis said the bill was "very much alive."

However, it's not certain what the bill would include. The original proposal called for

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state contractors to pay at least \$11.95 an hour. Mr. Middleton said that figure may be tweaked for employers who provide retirement benefits or for employers in rural areas.

Also back in play was the paper-voting-record legislation. The Senate shelved such a proposal just last week, and its sponsor said it didn't have much of a chance. But senators moved ahead yesterday on a separate but similar bill to require paper-ballot records by the 2010 election.

"It will definitely be out" for a vote by Monday, said Sen. Joan Carter Conway, a Baltimore Democrat who leads the committee that heard the bill yesterday. "You have a vast majority of constituents very concerned about the paper trail."

An advocate for a paper voting record applauded the change.

Johanna Neumann, of the Maryland Public Interest Research Group, said the bill would be a compromise because it takes effect only if Mr. O'Malley sets aside money to pay for new voting machines. Estimates vary, but the cost could be as much as \$30 million, a sticking point in earlier Senate debates.

Living-wage supporters were also upbeat by the apparent revival of that bill.

"The best way to fight poverty is to reward work with family-sustaining wages," said Sean Dobson, director of Progressive Maryland.

However, the turnarounds weren't reason for celebration yet, Mr. Dobson said. He noted situations change by the minute in the closing days of the session, so his advocates are still lobbying.

"You do that right up until the confetti falls," he said.

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