

OPINION

Legislative session in whirlwind phase as important deadlines loom



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Business Lobby

The 75th Nevada legislative session reached its midpoint on April 2, and based on what has been produced so far, we can expect a whirlwind of activity during the next 60 days. The deadline has passed for the introduction of bills from both individual legislators and committees, and April 10 was the deadline for committee passage (first house). The next deadline is April 21, when first-house passage of bills takes every

A flurry of bills address every conceivable topic this session. However, what we haven't seen is any movement toward concrete reform to the Public Employees Retirement and Benefits Systems. A number of bills have been introduced that make cursory changes to PEBS and/or PERS but nothing to date that will address the great risk to taxpayers this growing unfunded liability continues to create.

With a projected budget shortfall of somewhere between \$2.2 billion and \$3 billion, we've also not seen what tax increases or cuts the legislators

are discussing. While we are sure there are discussions taking place in every corner and room within the legislative building, nothing has made its way into the public arena.

Cost of Business Going Up
Effective July 1, Nevada's minimum wage will increase, thanks to a voter initiative that amended the Nevada Constitution without regard to market conditions. The minimum wage will increase from its current \$5.85 per hour to \$6.55 for employees who have health benefits available to them.

For those without such benefits, the minimum wage will increase to \$7.55. The new increase will also affect how overtime is paid. Nevada is one of six states with a daily overtime requirement in addition to weekly requirements. What does this mean? It means that employers must pay 1.5 times an employee's regular wage rate when they work more than 40 hours in any workweek or more than 8 hours in any workday. Based on the new minimum wage scale that takes effect July 1, daily overtime rates may be applicable if an employee is paid less than \$9.83 per hour with available health benefits and \$11.33 per hour without health benefits.

Unfortunately, with small businesses struggling throughout the state with the current economy, this (minimum wage increase) probably will translate into more lost jobs and less hiring of entry level workers.

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On the Federal Front
The Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) was introduced in both the House (HR 1409) and Senate (S. 560) with support from House representatives Shelley Berkley and Dina Titus, both D-Nev., as well as Sen. Harry Reid. U.S. Rep. Dean Heller and Sen. John Ensign, both R-Nev., strongly oppose this job-killing legislation.

The act's goal is to do away with secret-ballot elections in union organizing drives, and replace them with a simple "card check" process that is open to harassment and intimidation. It would impose binding arbitration on employers and employees if they don't agree on a contract within 120 days, and both sides would have to live

with the consequences for two years. It would impose penalties for labor-law violations — on employers, but not unions.

This issue is so important, and the ramifications if this passes so devastating to business growth and the growth of our economy, that the area chambers along with other business and trade organizations will come together with Ensign from 9:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. April 17 at Brady Industries, 7055 Lindell Road.

We urge you to attend to learn more about how the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act will affect your business. In the meantime, write your congressional representatives and tell them not to support this bill.

Sharon Powers is president and chief executive officer of the North Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce.