

Advocates promote higher minimum wage

BY TOM HESTER JR.
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TRENTON — A worker advocacy group called on legislators yesterday to increase the minimum wage to \$8.50 an hour, then require it to increase annually to keep pace with inflation.

The Raise the Wage Campaign, a coalition of 18 anti-poverty, worker rights, religious and government watchdog organizations, called the \$7.15 minimum wage insufficient to support full-time workers.

Despite the group's plea, key legislators said it's unlikely action would be taken anytime soon to increase the minimum wage.

New Jersey has the nation's 13th highest minimum wage. In December, a state commission said the minimum wage should be increased to \$8.25 per hour, which would be the nation's highest, then boosted annually to keep pace with inflation.

The commission found New Jersey's cost of living has risen 56 percent faster than the state's minimum wage and stated failure to increase the wage amounts to "an inflation-induced pay cut."

Businesses oppose increasing the minimum wage, saying it will boost prices and force employers to cut jobs.

"In the middle of a recession and with the cost of everything rising quickly, especially fuel, employers can't absorb the financial impact of raising the minimum wage,"

said Kevin Friedlander of New Jersey Chamber of Commerce. "It would cripple already struggling businesses, especially the smaller ones."

But Gov. Jon S. Corzine indicated yesterday he would back increasing the minimum wage, which was last increased in 2006.

"We want to make sure it is allowing our people to have at least a reasonable quality of life, and if you look at the minimum wage even at New Jersey's level after the change, it's not a living wage," Corzine said.

Senate Majority Leader Stephen Sweeney, D-Gloucester, has sponsored a bill to increase the minimum wage, but said he doesn't foresee action on it this year, noting lawmakers earlier this year approved letting workers take paid leave from work as of July 1, 2009.

"We just did paid family leave, and in fairness to the business community we've got to let them breathe a little bit," said Sweeney. "I don't anticipate making a push this year."

Senate President Richard J. Codey, D-Essex, said action to increase the minimum wage seems likely either in the fall or early next year. He also cited business concerns and the new leave law.

"The economy is bad already," said Codey. "We have to be considerate of that."

But Corzine said he didn't think they would be imposing "a requirement that is unreasonable."

