

UNEMPLOYMENT

Panel approves jobless benefits cuts

■ A House panel OK'd cutting state benefits from 26 to 20 weeks. It kept the maximum payout of \$275 a week.

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The News Service of Florida

A business-friendly unemployment compensation measure similar to a proposal by Gov. Rick Scott was approved Thursday by a House committee, promising lower taxes on employers, a shorter payout period and new requirements for workers seeking job benefits.

The plan also makes it easier for employers to fire workers for actions that take place outside the workplace, an expansion that some lawmakers argued would give bosses too much discretion in the lives of workers after hours.

Following testimony from business groups and unemployed workers who traveled from Miami, the House Economic Development and Tourism Subcommittee voted 7 to 4 for a jobless benefits proposal expected to be fast tracked in both chambers.

Lawmakers are responding to demands by businesses that saw their unemployment tax rates jump in January in response to the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

Mirroring a proposal unveiled by Scott earlier in the week, the House plan reduces the duration of state benefits from 26 to 20 weeks

while maintaining the current maximum payout of \$275 a week.

"We all know in an economy like this how important unemployment compensation is," said subcommittee chairman Rep. Doug Holder, R-Sarasota. "We know how our state is struggling and this [bill], quite frankly, represents the state's position on maintaining and expanding a business-friendly environment."

Critics, some of them currently out of work, said the bill focuses too heavily on trying to make it harder for workers to collect benefits and not the underlying causes of unemployment.

"We're concerned that the tone [of debate] seems to blame unemployed workers for the high unemployment in this state," said Karen Woodall, an advocate for the unemployed, who noted the state has lost 900,000 jobs over the past year. "We hope we can redirect the conversation."

Like Scott's proposal released earlier in the week, the House plan would tie the duration of future benefits to the state's unemployment rate, in addition to shortening the overall length of time benefits would be paid.

The bill would ratchet down the length of time a worker could receive an un-

employment check as the economy improved, reaching a maximum 12 weeks if unemployment hit 5 percent or less.

The House bill would also allow employers to fire workers for actions outside the workplace if they became a detriment to their duties on the job.

Business representatives said the provision is needed to make it harder for workers to take advantage of the system.

"The goal is to make employment pay, not make unemployment pay," said David Daniel, a lobbyist representing the Florida Association of Professional Employer Organizations, a group of employee leasing companies.

The state owes the federal government \$2 billion after a prolonged recession exhausted the state trust fund set up to pay claims.

Earlier Thursday, Senate President Mike Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island, said the issue remains in flux. The only given is that the Senate won't raise taxes.

"This is what we're going to go through for the next 90 days," Haridopolos said. "The governor has a plan. We're still working on ours. We just don't have a good enough plan for me to comment on."

