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Local leaders unsatisfied with bill

SANTA FE — The New Mexico Democrat-led House of Representatives rejected a bill that would have guaranteed paid time off for workers to cope with serious illnesses or care for newborns and loved ones on Feb. 14.
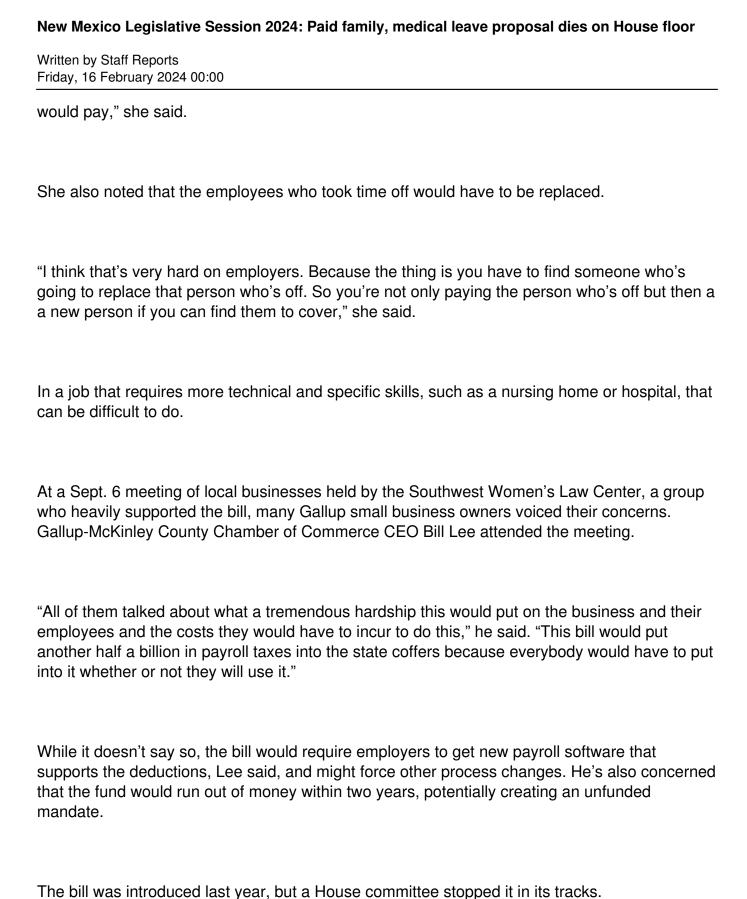
Eleven Democrats sided with Republicans, making the vote 34-36.

The failed proposal for paid leave would have eventually provided workers with up to 12 weeks of medical and family leave. The bill also included paid leave guarantee for workers who are victims of stalking, domestic violence, sexual assault, and abuse as they pursue a protection order, counseling, or flee their home.

Employers and employees would have both paid into the fund. Employees would have paid $5 for every $1,000 they earn; employers would have paid a matching $4 per $1,000. Federal employees working in the state would've been excluded. Only employers with more than five employees would have been required to pay into the fund, exempting about two-thirds of New Mexico businesses.

Rep. Patty Lundstrom voted against the bill. In an interview with the *Sun*, she explained that she thought it would end up costing employers too much money.

"The questions that I had, and the reason I didn't vote for it, is because I don't believe the fund, the way they had it designed, would remain solvent. When that happens it means you're increasing the amount of money that the business would pay as well as what the employee

would pay," she said.

She also noted that the employees who took time off would have to be replaced.

"I think that's very hard on employers. Because the thing is you have to find someone who's going to replace that person who's off. So you're not only paying the person who's off but then a a new person if you can find them to cover," she said.

In a job that requires more technical and specific skills, such as a nursing home or hospital, that can be difficult to do.

At a Sept. 6 meeting of local businesses held by the Southwest Women's Law Center, a group who heavily supported the bill, many Gallup small business owners voiced their concerns. Gallup-McKinley County Chamber of Commerce CEO Bill Lee attended the meeting.

"All of them talked about what a tremendous hardship this would put on the business and their employees and the costs they would have to incur to do this," he said. "This bill would put another half a billion in payroll taxes into the state coffers because everybody would have to put into it whether or not they will use it."

While it doesn't say so, the bill would require employers to get new payroll software that supports the deductions, Lee said, and might force other process changes. He's also concerned that the fund would run out of money within two years, potentially creating an unfunded mandate.

The bill was introduced last year, but a House committee stopped it in its tracks.

Lundstrom said one of her main problems with the bill was that it covered too many categories of beneficiaries. She hopes that the bill comes back next year, and that it's more manageable.

New Mexico Legislative Session 2024: Paid family, medical leave proposal dies on House floor

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"It just didn't seem like [this bill] was 'cooked enough' I would say. I hope they go back this interim and work on it again. I hope they come back with another version, and it's a more slimmed down version so we can build it in increments," she said.

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