

Mass. House proposes \$89M in health fees

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By Glen Johnson, AP Political Writer | July 29, 2008

BOSTON --The House of Representatives voted Tuesday to seek another \$89 million from the state, insurance companies and health care providers to support the Massachusetts universal health care law.

Business leaders targeted by Gov. Deval Patrick for another \$33 million in contributions were spared, under a proposal that was announced by House leaders Tuesday and then debated by the members several hours later.

Patrick's administration had proposed closing a loophole that has allowed some companies that did not provide insurance and had more than 10 employees to avoid paying a \$295-per-worker fee.

House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi said in a statement that "modest changes" would allow the law to survive while striking the right balance between state and private-sector involvement.

After more than three hours of debate, members agreed by a margin of 135-21. The bill was then sent to the Senate.

Patrick spokesman Kyle Sullivan said that regardless of legislative action, the governor retains the authority to make regulatory changes to collect the additional business fees. Sullivan refused to say if Patrick would do that.

Since taking effect in April 2006, the law has enabled about 340,000 people to obtain health insurance but skyrocketing costs have forced the state to increase premiums and seek new revenue.

"The whole underlying philosophy of health care reform is `shared responsibility,'" Patrick told reporters last week. "Everybody's got to step up, and we've asked and the business has asked individuals to step up, asked the state to step up, and the state has done so, and now the other participants have to step up as well."

The health insurance changes were tacked onto a supplemental appropriation bill proposing to dispense a variety of funds for the budget year that concluded June 30.

In that bill, Patrick also proposed hiking the state's gun license fee from \$100 to \$250. Gun rights groups objected, and a variety of amendments proposed doing away with the fee altogether.

Rep. George N. Peterson Jr., R-Grafton, offered an amendment proposing to reduce -- not raise -- the fee from \$100 to \$40.

While conceding it would cost the state revenue, Peterson told his colleagues a previous hike from \$40 to \$100 had paid for systems to improve gun registration.

"Those expenditures are gone," he said, justifying a return the original fee.

Members approved the amendment by a vote 94-57, one of the only amendments to the supplemental bill that was approved. ■