

Democrats continue efforts to slow prevailing wage repeal

By Pamela Pritt Register-Herald Reporter/ February 2 2016

CHARLESTON — Continuing their efforts to put the brakes on a piece of legislation that would repeal the state's prevailing wage rates on public projects, Democrats made their eighth request for a fiscal note to accompany the bill.

It was Senate Minority Whip John Unger's turn to demand the Senate enforce its rules for including fiscal notes on bills that will affect state revenues, asking Senate President Bill Cole, R-Mercer, to uphold his request.

"Allow the public to know exactly what the cost is," Unger said. "It's not a good idea to hide or conceal any information from the public."

Cole ruled against Unger's request, causing the Berkeley County Democrat to ask for a vote on Cole's determination.

The vote was 18-16, along party lines.

Republicans again won the day when Senate Minority Leader Jeff Kessler, D-Marshall, made a motion to reject the bill on first reading.

Democrats in the House of Delegates made the same request, both in committee and on the floor, to no avail. The bill passed the lower chamber with eight Republicans defecting to vote with the Democratic minority.

Prevailing wage rates have long been a thorn in the GOP's side. When Republicans took the majority in both chambers last year, repealing the wage rates was a priority, but the bill was amended to be a study to be done by WorkForce West Virginia, West Virginia University and Marshall University.

WorkForce sent surveys to state businesses. When only a handful were returned by June, GOP leadership cried foul, demanded that only U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data be used and refused to grant an extension of the wage through the summer. New prevailing wage rates — not all that different than the previous rates — resumed at the end of September.

In the interim period, four schools, two with prevailing wage and two without, were built in the state. Numbers vary on how much the school systems may have saved by not using prevailing wage rates. Opponents of the bill say that site preparation and other costs cannot be factored into the comparison, making the real savings as low as \$1.52 per square foot, while those who support repeal cite savings in the millions of dollars.

The bill moves to second reading today, when it can be amended from the floor.

The Senate passed five bills Tuesday, two of them having to do with wildlife. SB 333 is about the taking and registering of wildlife, while SB 334 identifies coyotes as a fur-bearing animal and the woodchuck as a game animal.