

# Local lawmakers bills OK'd for short session

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LEWISTON — State Rep. Mike Beaulieu, R-Auburn, wants to clarify who is responsible for paying unemployment to workers who are laid off from more than one job.

State Sen. John Nutting, D-Leeds, wants to strengthen Maine's ballot initiative process by tracking who is collecting signatures. And the entire Lewiston/Auburn delegation wants to make it easier to search for seniors who go missing.

These are a few of the bill proposals submitted by local lawmakers that received approval from the Legislative Council earlier this month. The council, made up of House and Senate leadership from both sides of the aisle, must approve submissions for the second session of the Legislature, which runs from January to April. During this shorter session, fewer bills are considered.

Beaulieu's bill is based on a constituent request from an employer who laid off a worker and was concerned about the equity of Maine's law regarding unemployment pay.

"(The worker) was employed by someone else at the exact same time and the two employers laid the person off," Beaulieu said. "The state automatically takes the unemployment compensation from the account of the (employer) who most recently released that individual."

Beaulieu said he hoped to find a way to split the liability between the two employers in a way that doesn't conflict with federal law.

Nutting's proposal to address the state's ballot initiative process is a reaction to a national report criticizing Maine's system. Maine is one of the few states in the country where signature-gathering businesses do not have to register with the Secretary of State or provide a list of names of signature gatherers, Nutting said.

"We don't have a clue who's out there," he said. "They can be just out of jail in one state for collecting signatures (illegally) and be on the street in Maine collecting them."

Under current Maine law, petitioners must be certified Maine voters, but they may work alongside out-of-staters who vocally solicit for signatures. There is also nothing illegal about signature-gatherers lying to get people to sign petitions and Nutting said he hopes to address that as well.

State Sen. Deb Simpson, D-Auburn, also got the council's OK for a bill that would help people obtain bank accounts.

"So instead of going to pay day lenders or those instant check-cashing agencies, you'd have a bank so you could go cash your check," she said.

The fees involved with such services amount to much more than costs incurred by traditional banking, Simpson said.

Rep. Peggy Rotundo, D-Lewiston, also successfully submitted a bill that would establish a "silver alert" program on behalf of the local delegation. Similar to the Amber alert designed to allow law enforcement to quickly launch and coordinate searches for missing children, the "silver alert" would apply to missing elderly suffering from dementia.

"There have been concerns in this community because of some tragic situations that have happened this past year; there was someone with local ties who had wandered off and when they found him, he was dead," Rotundo said. "The alert would send people out faster."

A proposal by state Rep. Stacy Dostie, D-Sabattus, to enhance Maine's Right to Know law was also approved by the council. Inspired by local council actions in Sabattus and Lewiston, Dostie's proposal would clarify and strengthen laws designed to prevent public officials from making policy decisions privately.

Lawmakers whose proposals were rejected by the Legislative Council have the opportunity to appeal the decision. All approved bills will be taken up in January through the normal legislative process, which includes a public hearing, committee work session and floor votes.

For more information about second session bill proposals, visit <http://tinyurl.com/yfv3pdc>

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