

New House Speaker Jase Bolger says 'right-to-work' status is 'on the table'

Updated Jan 13, 2011; Posted Jan 13, 2011

1 [Facebook] [Twitter] [Email] [More] 411 shares

By [Peter Luke](#)
Bridge Magazine



AP PhotoHouse Speaker Jase Bolger, R-Marshall, applauds fellow members and guests Wednesday at the state Capitol in Lansing. The state's 96th Legislature convened for the first time Wednesday. LANSING — New House Speaker Jase Bolger said a labor law review by his fellow Republicans would be conducted to gauge whether [making Michigan a "right-to-work" state](#) makes economic sense and would create jobs.

While [Gov. Rick Snyder said throughout the campaign](#) that having a right-to-work discussion would be too divisive at a time when he says management and labor have to work together, Bolger said Wednesday nothing should be off the table.

In a speech in the House chambers [after his election as speaker](#), Bolger said "all options" would be looked at. "Gone must be the days where things were taken off the table because they were uncomfortable to talk about."

Bolger, of Marshall, later told reporters that "we have to have that conversation about right-to-work, we have to explore the pros and cons, we have to put all things on the table that would make Michigan more competitive."

Republicans have a new 63-47 margin in the House, but Bolger said [allowing workers to legally opt out of paying union dues](#) would be vetted through an "open, thoughtful and deliberate" process in committee.

"I agree with Gov. Snyder when he says it's a divisive issue and there are many more important things we ought to be working on in Michigan," said Mark Gaffney, president of the Michigan State AFL-CIO. "Do you really attract business by having a long, bitter protracted fight between corporations and labor, or conservatives and progressives?"

House Republicans also intend to call a "strict" 48-month time limit for welfare benefits, which currently can be extended past 60 months if recipients are working or in job training. And he wants to review and correct what he called "abuse" of the Bridge Card food assistance program.

Bolger would start the clock retroactively to provide current and future recipients an absolute maximum of four years of assistance.

"Michigan should help its citizens break the cycle of dependency, not create one for them," Bolger said.

Gilda Jacobs, president of the Michigan League for Human Services, says applying a time limit retroactively would punish recipients who are "playing by the rules to support their families and earn a better living. You don't change the rules midstream, especially in today's job market."

Bolger also said the House would aim to complete the 2012 budget, including guidance for 2013, by June 1. But [overhauling the business tax code](#) may take more time.

House Bill 4001, the first of the new session, would repeal the 22 percent surcharge to the Michigan Business Tax lawmakers passed in 2007. Bolger said surcharge repeal could be done ahead of a full-blown replacement of the MBT. But he also said the tax cut would be paid for up front, either through broadening the tax base, eliminating business tax cuts or enacting spending cuts.

Neither did he put a timetable on right-to-work legislation, but the corporate re-location firm that studied the state's business climate for Michigan Economic Development Corp. recommends it.

"Michigan suffers from two major problems," said Ronald Pollina, president of Pollina Corporate Real Estate Inc. outside Chicago. "One is high corporate business taxes and two is the fact that it's not a right-to-work state."

He said if Snyder can tackle one of those, he'll boost the state's business standing. Business tax reform might be the easier one, he said, given the difficulties of enacting right-to-work in states with even less of a labor history than Michigan. Kentucky tried it several years ago and failed, he said. A similar effort that's been launched in Indiana also faces difficulty.

Even if right-to-work passed the House and Senate, and was signed into law by Snyder, organized labor would likely put the measure on the 2012 ballot for a voter referendum and could spend unlimited amounts to defeat it. Whether corporate Michigan, which hasn't pressed for right-to-work, would put up the cash to defend it is unclear.

Snyder said in his inaugural address that Michigan had "been it's own worst enemy" because "we have spent too much time fighting among ourselves."

E-mail Peter Luke: pluke@boothmichigan.com

View Comments (1)