

# The Columbus Dispatch

High 36 | Low 27  
Details B8 

WWW.DISPATCH.COM

\$2.00 

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2010

## Pension bill may save jobs

Bipartisan push aims to aid contributions, prevent future layoffs

By Jonathan Riskind  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

WASHINGTON — It is an example of that most elusive of creatures these days on Capitol Hill: an issue that finds common ground among Democrats and Republicans, labor unions and businesses.

But it also is an example of yet another instance of Congress scrambling to reach a final consensus even as, proponents say, the clock rapidly ticks down to disaster for many companies and workers.

It might sound arcane: a pension-funding-relief bill.



**"At the end of the day, this (pension bill) is about a jobs bill."**

**REP. PAT TIBERI**  
R-Genoa Township

But the bill's co-authors — Democratic Rep. Earl Pomeroy of North Dakota, GOP Rep. Pat Tiberi of Genoa Township and other backers — note that the measure was dropped from a Senate jobs bill after Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid pared back that legislation, which the Senate approved last week. Pension-fund-relief proponents still hope for success in March, either in a new jobs bill or by attaching their proposal to a measure extending popular tax breaks about to expire or to a small-business assistance bill.

The pension bill, proponents say, should be regarded as a must-pass jobs bill, too.

Pomeroy and Tiberi say that because of the recession and stock-market downturn, the federally mandated pension-fund-contribution requirements will be so steep in the next couple of years that it will affect employment.

Many employers, they say, will wind up having to lay off workers — or not hire new ones — because they will be forced to pump so much cash into

See **PENSION BILL** Page D2

### PENSION BILL

FROM PAGE D1

their pension funds. Or, they added, employers might freeze funds.

Without the legislation, increased pension-fund costs could force more than two out of three pension-plan sponsors to make other cuts, including in the areas of hiring and workforce training, says the American Benefits Council, a national trade association representing companies on employee-benefits issues.

"At the end of the day, this (pension bill) is about a jobs bill," Tiberi said.

But Tiberi said he is concerned that a bill he thinks should have been a slam-dunk to pass months ago could still get caught up in

partisan disagreements.

The proposal is a result of negotiations among businesses, labor unions and nonprofits and would spread over a longer period the money employers have to put into pension funds.

It requires interest-only payments for two years and spreads out the rest over either seven or 15 years, though some other periods are possible.

Employers that have frozen their pension funds also would be able to take part, although they might not have the 15-year option. There is sentiment in the House for giving active plans more time than non-active plans, but the inclination in the Senate is not to differentiate in how the plans are treated.

"This is absolutely crit-

ical. We're all feeling the pain," said John Agenbrood, executive officer/secretary treasurer of a chapter of the Graphics Communications Conference of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The chapter counts 6,000 members in Ohio and five other states.

About 5,000 of his members are covered by the type of pension plans that need the relief offered by the Pomeroy-Tiberi bill, he said.

Agenbrood said he doesn't want to include frozen pensions in the compromise legislation now being worked out between the House Ways and Means Committee and the Education and Labor committee. But he and other union members are willing to go along with that compromise to maintain bipartisan

backing and get a bill passed.

But a potential stumbling block remains. The chairman of the Education Committee, Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., wants to include a proposal in the pension bill to force better disclosure of fee costs for 401(k) plans.

That could bog down the legislation amid opposition from some in the financial-services industry. Not all Democrats on the Ways and Means Committee might be in favor, either.

A Miller spokesman, however, said the congressman recognizes that pension relief needs to pass.

Ric Watkins, co-owner of Watkins Printing in Columbus, says he and the 25 graphics-communications union employees in his shop who are covered by his

pension plan need prompt action.

Watkins has a pension problem that this bill apparently will not take on in the pending compromise version: He is the last of what used to be 18 companies in one of the pensions he runs, leaving him with a liability, at least on paper. But what's going to be in the bill will help.

"It would lessen the pain," Watkins said.

Pomeroy predicted success soon for the legislation, pointing to recent positive comments during a hearing by Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner about the need for pension relief.

"Our goal is basically to moderate the hits," Pomeroy said. "The support behind this is very broad." [jriskind@dispatch.com](mailto:jriskind@dispatch.com)