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## **Dems look to boost New Mexico's minimum wage**

**One measure seeks gradual increase to \$12 hourly rate; another calls for \$15 in 2020**

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Democrats campaigned on raising New Mexico's minimum wage. Now, after big wins in last month's election, here's the question: how high?

Two lawmakers have filed separate bills ahead of the legislative session set to begin in mid-January, with one proposing to boost the statewide minimum to \$12 an hour, phased in over the next few years, and another calling for \$15 an hour.

Both would end the lower minimum wage for tipped workers, such as waiters.

And both are bound to face opposition from industry groups, which contend higher minimum wages would be a hit on small businesses.

But Gov.-elect Michelle Lujan Grisham was clear on the campaign trail about her support for lifting the wage floor, and she came away with a 14-point victory. Democrats have a bigger majority in the House of Representatives, too.

However, while some Democrats have passed minimum wage increases in the past, some conservative members of their caucus in the New Mexico Senate may bristle at what would amount to a relatively large increase over the state's current rate of \$7.50 an hour.

All eyes therefore will fall on lawmakers in the left and right wings of the Democratic Party, who may soon find themselves in a tussle over how exactly to deliver on a key campaign promise.

For Eric Griego, executive director of the advocacy group New Mexico Working Families Party, the starting place for this debate is not the current rate but what it would cost for a family of four to make ends meet.

In turn, the group is echoing calls by labor unions and advocacy organizations around the country for effectively doubling the current minimum wage over time.

"We think a family should be able to support themselves on a full-time salary," Griego said, "and \$15 an hour puts you just above that level."

Rep. Patricia Roybal Caballero, D-Albuquerque, proposes raising the state's minimum wage to \$15 an hour starting on Jan. 1, 2020. Starting the following year, the minimum would be adjusted annually based on inflation, as reflected in the consumer price index.

Rep. Miguel Garcia, D-Albuquerque, has proposed a more modest increase. He wants to raise minimum pay to \$10 an hour, then to \$11 an hour in July 2020 and to \$12 an hour in July 2021. Starting one year after that point, the minimum wage would be adjusted annually based on inflation.

That is in line with the campaign platform of Lujan Grisham, who argued the move would boost pay for more than 100,000 New Mexicans.

“We will lift thousands out of poverty and ensure that they have a living wage in the future,” she wrote in an economic plan released in April.

A \$10 minimum hourly wage also would put New Mexico right in between its neighbors. The minimum wage is \$10.50 in Arizona and \$10.20 in Colorado, according to the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute. Both states plan to raise the wage to

\$12 an hour in 2020. Texas, Oklahoma and Utah have no minimum wage separate from the federal rate of

\$7.25 an hour.

Some cities and counties in New Mexico already have set higher rates, though. The city and county of Santa Fe, for example, have set the minimum wage at \$11.40 an hour.

The minimum wage in Taos remains \$7.50 an hour, but many businesses including fast-food restaurants pay \$8 to \$10 minimum to attract workers.

Business groups are wary of raising wages paid by small-business owners.

“We think any policy approach the Legislature or the governor-elect pursue would have to be sensitive to small businesses,” said Rob Black, CEO of the New Mexico Association of Commerce and Industry.

Black raised particular concern about annual adjustments based on the cost of living.

The Legislature should review changes to the minimum wage, Black said, rather than putting it on what he likened to autopilot, which would add uncertainty for businesses.

“You want businesses to have a sense of how they can plan going forward, making hiring decisions,” he said.

That argument may resonate with some conservative Democrats who have backed smaller minimum wage increases in the past with carve-outs for trainees. Those might be poison pills for advocacy groups, though. But conservative Democrats may not be eager to fight with the new governor or with members of their own party heading into re-election campaigns in 2020.