

Senate OKs union bill; GOP warns Ritter

Republicans: Signing it would betray businesses

By ED SEALOVER THE GAZETTE

DENVER - A bill making it easier to establish a closed union shop in Colorado passed the Senate on Monday on a party line vote, prompting Republicans to warn Gov. Bill Ritter that signing it would endanger his political future.

HB1072 eliminates the second, secret-ballot vote of employees required to set up a union shop at any company in the state. Democrats, including Sen. Jennifer Veiga, the proposal's Senate sponsor, argue it is a minor change that removes government interference from the union-forming process.

Republicans, however, say it will remove one of the state's key selling points to prospective employers.

GOP senators tried unsuccessfully to amend the bill 73 times Friday.

Republicans argued Monday that the bill should change the attitudes of businesses toward the new Democratic governor. Ritter won in a landslide in November, partly because he wooed many business leaders who typically support Republicans. Business groups have been the loudest opponents of HB1072.

"Barely three weeks into the governance of Ritter, (House Speaker Andrew) Romanoff and (Senate President Joan) Fitzgerald, Colorado labor law is about to take a lurch to the left," Sen. Shawn Mitchell, R-Broomfield, said. "Thank you for ripping off the mask of moderation and showing what the business community and the labor community can expect."

Veiga, D-Denver, scoffed at Republicans' assertion that keeping the Colorado Labor Peace Act, the law that requires the second union vote, would be an act of moderation. The GOP has been trying for years to get rid of the compromise law and turn Colorado into a so-called right-to-work state, she said.

States with right-to-work statutes prohibit trade unions from making union membership or payment of dues a condition of employment.

Ritter has said he is leaning toward signing the bill. Spokesman Evan Dreyer said Monday that the governor has paid close attention to all that has been said and that he will make a decision in the next week or so.

House and Senate Republicans delivered a letter to Ritter's office Monday afternoon asking him, again, to veto the bill. They referred to the "Colorado Promise" plan Ritter pitched to voters, noting it included talk about health care, education and renewable energy — but nothing about union votes.

"Did Bill Ritter have his fingers crossed behind his back when he made the Colorado Promise?" said Sen. Josh Penry, R-Fruita.

Dreyer said, however, that Ritter was asked several times about such a bill on the campaign trail and indicated he would be willing to listen.

Under HB1072, unions would no longer need approval from 75 percent of a company's employees to require all employees to pay union fees whether or not they join the union.

Veiga noted that the federal government removed such a clause from its law 56 years ago, finding it costly and unnecessary.

Business leaders have discussed the idea of trying to put a right-to-work initiative onto the 2008 ballot if HB1072 becomes law.

"This does feel like a broken promise to business, and this is not what business expected of a moderate agenda," said Barbara Thompson, executive vice president of the Mountain States Employers Council.

Sen. John Morse, D-Colorado Springs, countered that he doesn't think Ritter's likely support of the bill will affect his political future because the state's economy would not be affected by its enactment.