

Murphy, Assembly speaker say \$15 minimum wage bill coming

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. — Legislation raising New Jersey's minimum wage by 75 percent to \$15 an hour is a top priority for the state's Democrat-led state government and could come this fall, Gov. Phil Murphy and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin said Thursday.

Murphy and Coughlin, both Democrats, appeared at a New Brunswick community kitchen to push for the higher wage, a long-running promise that has so far gone unfulfilled.

Murphy, who campaigned as an unabashed liberal in last year's gubernatorial contest to succeed Republican Chris Christie, said the state's current rate of \$8.60 is unacceptable.

"The path to a stronger and fairer New Jersey includes raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour and ensuring fairness and opportunity for everyone in our state," the freshman governor said.

New Jersey's current rate is tethered to inflation rates and may go up accordingly.

Details of a bill are sketchy, but Coughlin said that a draft is underway and it's a priority to get something out this fall.

Murphy said he wants to get it done in the "next couple of months," and added that he wants the increase phased in over time to avoid "sticker shock for businesses."

Senate President Steve Sweeney was not at the event but said he's committed to the higher wage as well.

"It is the right thing to do for working people and the smart thing to do for the economy," he said in a statement.

Republicans are lukewarm on raising the wage alone.

Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean Jr. proposed considering cuts to the state's pension and retiree health benefits as part of a possible bipartisan compromise.

The higher minimum wage remains an unfulfilled campaign promise for Murphy, who soon after winning election last year appeared with lawmakers to push for the higher wage.

Former Republican Gov. Chris Christie vetoed legislation to phase in the higher wage in 2016.

California, Massachusetts and New York have laws that call for phasing in a higher rate until it reaches \$15 an hour, along with the District of Columbia, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

New Jersey's current rate stems from a 2013 constitutional amendment that raised the rate from \$7.25 to \$8.25, and thereafter according to inflation.

