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Efforts stalled to keep hands out of paid family leave bill

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TRENTON | More than a month after workers began paying into the fund that supports paid family leave insurance, a bill is still pending that would allow voters to put the account in a so-called lock box.

Assemblyman Jay Webber on Thursday called for the Assembly to move on the legislation. It would keep governors and the Legislature from dipping into the money for other uses.

If passed and approved by voters, the measure would also protect other employee and employer contribution funds. That includes the nearly insolvent unemployment insurance fund that governors have tapped to the tune of \$4.7 billion.

"While we can't recover the billions of dollars diverted from trust funds in past years, we can and should make sure that those kinds of raids never occur again," said Webber, R-Morris/Passaic. "I urge the Legislature to put the 'trust' back in 'trust fund' and bring a constitutional amendment to the Assembly floor."

The bill passed the Senate unanimously last month. It has been referred to the Assembly Labor Committee.

Senate Majority Leader Stephen Sweeney, sponsor of the paid family leave and the lock box bill, said approval of the measure remains a top priority.

"Just look at what's happened to the unemployment fund," said Sweeney, D-Gloucester. "It created a crisis for us in New Jersey where it didn't need to be. There was plenty of money."

The fund from which unemployment claims are paid contains less than \$400 million. The state is looking to the federal government for cash to avoid a business tax increase automatically triggered by the low level of money in the fund.

Assemblyman John Burzichelli, sponsor of the lock box measure in the lower house, said he is unaware of any effort to hold up the bill. Burzichelli, D-

Gloucester, added there is more than enough time for the legislation to be passed and placed on the November ballot for voters' consideration.

But New Jersey Business and Industry Association President Philip Kirschner said this is the time, with money tight, to pass the legislation and send it to voters.

"It's doubly important, when states are fishing around for every dollar they can find, to protect funds," Kirschner said.

Weekly payroll deductions averaging \$33 a year began Jan. 1. Beginning July 1, the paid family leave act allows workers to take up to six weeks of time off to care for a sick family member, newborn or newly adopted child. Under the insurance, workers could collect two-thirds of their pay or up to \$546 a week.

Assemblyman Nelson Albano, who sponsored the paid family leave measure, called prohibiting diversions crucial to ensuring the program functions properly.

"I want to make sure that this is the success that we said it was going to be," said Albano, D-Cumberland. "This could mean whether (residents) have the ability to make a mortgage payment."