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Ehrlich attacks Maryland regulators

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Former Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. is attacking Maryland regulators for making the state anti-business.

"It's the most incredibly hostile regulator environment a lot of people have seen in this state, ever," Ehrlich said.

The Republican hoping to unseat Democratic Gov. Martin O'Malley spoke with the editorial board of The Frederick News-Post during a visit to Frederick Monday afternoon.

When asked if he believed Maryland was anti-business, Ehrlich said rankings from Cato Institute, George Mason University and The Heritage Foundation have ranked Maryland as heading to the 50th slot.

And he singled out one agency in particular -- the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation.

It is that agency Ehrlich's campaign has criticized for taking down a July jobs report with a gloomy forecast after objections from the O'Malley administration.

"Manipulating unemployment numbers is the least of their problems," Ehrlich said. "Their problems have been certain constituencies exerting great influence over the operation over the next four years."

If elected, Ehrlich said he would work to reduce regulations governing stormwater management, the administration of the unemployment trust fund, and would renew a cooperative agreement between the Department of Agriculture and the Maryland Department of the Environment.

"The regulatory environment is the governor," Ehrlich said. "You set the tone, you appoint the people, you pass or don't pass or generate those regulations."

Ehrlich said he had hosted roughly 70 business roundtables around the state and had spoken with hundreds of business leaders. Only one had won a contested hearing for unemployment benefits.

Ehrlich said employees were being awarded benefits after getting fired for stealing from the employer, drinking or showing up late.

"The next Maryland employer I meet who will have won a contested unemployment hearing will be the first in four years," Ehrlich said.

Ehrlich pledged to repeal a sales tax increase taking it from 5 percent to 6 percent. To pay for the repeal, Ehrlich said one-third to one-half the money would be made up by people buying more in the state.

Ehrlich said people were going to Delaware and other states to make purchasing, hurting "border Maryland" retailers in Ocean City, Frederick County and Western Maryland.

To pay for the rest of the repeal, Ehrlich said he would push cost savings measures such as changing the pension system for new hires. Instead of offering them defined benefits, he would offer a 401(k) or similar investment plan.

Ehrlich also said he would work with employee unions to stop pay increases temporarily in exchange for not furloughing employees and promising to approve pay raises when the economy rebounds.

In the area of transportation, Ehrlich wants to concentrate on rapid bus. That cost, including building dedicated bus lanes, would be about 85 percent less than light rail, Ehrlich said.

He envisions using rapid buses to reduce the traffic congestion on I-270.

"They're clean, they're green and they're cheap. And they carry people," Ehrlich said.

In Maryland, buses and heavy rail have been more successful than light rail and metro, so that is where Ehrlich said he would concentrate his efforts. He opposes the proposed red line and purple line in Baltimore and near



Photo by Travis Pratt

Candidate for governor Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. meets with The Frederick News-Post's editorial board.

Washington.

"I like things that work and that people use, and clearly rapid bus and heavy rail, where people are acclimated and use -- it makes sense," he said.

During visits to Frederick County, Ehrlich has noticed more angst from farmers and the middle class. Concerns about generational debt and worries from parents that their educated children can't get a job will impact the election, he said.

"It occurred to me that this may be an opportunity to run and win and change the culture in Annapolis," Ehrlich said.

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