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Sunday car sales measure for Baltimore County placed in neutral

Bill pulled in Annapolis some dealers don't want it

February 16, 2011 | By Steve Schuster, sschuster@patuxent.com

A bill in the General Assembly that would allow Baltimore County car dealerships to conduct business on Sundays was introduced Jan. 31 by state Sen. Bobby Zirkin -- then pulled less than two weeks later, on Feb. 11.

Several car dealers in the county said they didn't want it.

"(Working Sunday) would be my worst nightmare, said Matt Proutt, sales manager for the past seven years at Northwest Honda in Owings Mills.

Bruce Schindler, owner of Bob Davidson Ford Lincoln in Towson, said, "I vehemently oppose it.

"I don't believe it will increase our sales at all," said Schindler, "but it would increase expenses. And, employee satisfaction would surely decrease."

Under current Maryland law, only car dealerships in a three counties -- Howard, Montgomery and Prince George's -- are allowed to operate on Sundays.

Legislation to include Baltimore County on that list has been discussed in the past, and a bill was introduced for this session by Zirkin, a Democrat representing the 11th District, in Pikesville and Owings Mills.

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But this week, the Senate Committee on Judicial Proceedings confirmed that Zirkin withdrew the bill Feb. 11.

The senator could not be reached for comment on why it was pulled, but last week he told the county's senate delegation he had introduced the bill in response to requests from constituents -- and, ironically, cited representatives from Northwest Honda in Owings Mills among supporters.

At the delegation's Feb. 10 meeting, Zirkin said, "I don't have strong opinion on this," but said he wanted to put the measure up for debate.

Ed Dreiband, owner of Northwest BMW-Honda, confirmed that he asked Zirkin to introduce the bill because he felt Baltimore County dealers had a competitive disadvantage against dealers in neighboring Howard County.

"In today's world, people need convenience to shop and they don't get have that if they can't come in on Sundays," Dreiband said.

Dreiband noted the legislation would only have provided an option to car dealers to remain open on Sunday -- and would not have required it.

"I just know that I would like the opportunity to make a choice, I don't think its fair in today's world that we don't have choice," Dreiband said.

But even before he pulled it, Zirkin said he knew not everyone was in favor of the bill.

"I've heard from as many car dealers against it," he said last week.

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Count among them Proutt. He said his dealership probably does lose sales because they are not open on Sundays -- but said he would still be against the bill because he already works 75 hours a week, and values the remaining time with his family.

"I have four kids and I go to church on Sundays," he said. "Personally, I would hate to lose that time for my kids."

Gary Burlage, a salesman at Heritage Honda in Towson, said he would not like car dealerships to conduct business on Sundays.

Burlage said he previously worked at a car dealership in Montgomery County that was open on Sundays.

"I sold one car over a 5-year period (on a Sunday)," he said.

At Bob Davidson Ford Lincoln in Towson, Schindler said the dealership is already open until 9 p.m., six days a week.

He said staying closed on Sunday benefits employees and customers.

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"I think our employees would rather be able to have a day off, and I think that on Sundays our customers really just want to come by and browse without a sales person ... in a relaxed fashion."

As far as the argument that Baltimore County dealerships are losing money to other jurisdictions, Schindler doesn't buy that.

"Our sales numbers are strong," he said. "I don't see our customers going to Howard County (on Sundays)."

One of those competitors agree.

Scott Rippy, a sales manager with Apple Ford in Columbia, said his dealership tried conducting business on Sundays, but later stopped because it had so little success.

"It didn't work," Rippy said. "All of the business is either pushed back a day to Saturday, or moved forward to Monday."

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