

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION**Metro; Obama blasts Georgia bill**

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Highlight: Crackdown on illegal immigrants 'a mistake,' president warns. Legislation's fans, foes expect a court battle.

Body

President Barack Obama called Georgia's Arizona-style immigration enforcement bill "a mistake," possibly setting the stage for a showdown between Georgia and the federal government.

Opponents of Georgia's House Bill 87 said they were glad to see the president weigh in against the legislation, but they want the Obama administration to go further and challenge it in court. At the same time, supporters said the state needs to act because the federal government has failed to do enough about illegal immigration.

Both sides expect the measure, which authorizes local police to investigate suspected illegal immigrants, to wind up in court. Opponents say they are drafting a lawsuit to block HB 87. Gov. Nathan Deal's office confirmed Wednesday the governor would sign it during the first two weeks of May.

Obama addressed HB 87 in an interview with WSB-TV this week. He defended the federal government's efforts to curb illegal immigration and said "comprehensive immigration reform" is the better way to go.

"It is a mistake for states to try to do this piecemeal," he said of Georgia's measure. "We can't have 50 different immigration laws around the country. Arizona tried this, and a federal court already struck them down."

The author of HB 87 --- state Rep. Matt Ramsey, R-Peachtree City --- said Georgia has been forced to take action because the federal government has failed. Illegal immigrants, Ramsey said in statement, are sapping Georgia's taxpayer-funded resources.

"We simply cannot afford to wait on solutions from Washington, D.C.," Ramsey said in response to the president. "We will continue to take decisive and necessary action as a state to enforce the rule of law and protect our citizens from the problems posed by the federal government's failure to live up to its most basic responsibility to secure our nation's borders."

Adelina Nicholls, executive director of the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights, was glad to hear the president's comments. But she wants the Obama administration to get tougher.

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A Justice Department spokeswoman said this week she had no comment on whether her agency plans to sue to block Georgia's HB 87, as it has done with a similar law Arizona enacted last year.

On Wednesday, a spokesman for Deal said Georgia plans to work cooperatively with the federal government. Deal, for example, would like to see an immigration enforcement program expanded in Georgia that partners local and federal authorities in illegal immigration crackdowns, the governor's spokesman said.

"We'd welcome a meeting with the president about that," said Deal spokesman, Brian Robinson.

The Obama administration sued to block Arizona's law last year, arguing such enforcement is for federal authorities. A federal judge sided with the White House and put some elements of Arizona's law on hold. Arizona appealed that decision. A federal appeals court recently upheld the lower court's decision, keeping much of the law on hold pending the outcome of the federal lawsuit.

Arizona has lost dozens of conventions to boycotts after enacting its law. One estimate puts the cost of canceled convention bookings alone at \$141 million in Arizona.

Fearing similar fallout, the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau announced Wednesday that its executive committee will meet Friday to pass a resolution opposing the measure. William Pate, the organization's president, is concerned HB 87 could damage the region's \$10 billion travel and tourism industry.

Other opponents of HB 87 are ratcheting up their pressure on Deal to veto the bill. Some are hanging up banners in Atlanta that are critical of the measure. Others are planning to rally against the legislation Sunday morning outside the state Capitol.

Julio Penaranda, general manager of the Plaza Fiesta mall on Buford Highway in DeKalb County, said he has noticed an impact at his shopping center, which mostly includes Hispanic-owned stores. He and other businessmen say Hispanics fearful of the crackdown have stopped shopping. Some are fleeing the state, they said.

"We have seen a slight increase in sales this year, but as soon as this bill was passed, that has dropped," Penaranda said. "So we are back to levels of sales that we saw when the recession was just starting to come in."

Immigration crackdown

Gov. Nathan Deal said he plans to sign a sweeping immigration law next month that would:

Require Georgia businesses with more than 10 employees to use the federal E-Verify program to determine whether their new hires are eligible to work in the United States.

Empower local and state police to arrest illegal immigrants and transport them to state and federal jails.

Punish people who use fake identification to get a job in Georgia with up to 15 years in prison and up to \$250,000 in fines.

Penalize people who --- while committing another crime --- knowingly transport or harbor illegal immigrants or encourage them to come to Georgia. First-time offenders would face imprisonment for up to 12 months and up to \$1,000 in fines.

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