

Illegal immigrants will be hot state topic;

Lawmakers aim to cut crime rate

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Body

Illegal immigration may become one of the most fiercely debated issues when the **state** Legislature reconvenes in January.

A panel of Georgia House and Senate **lawmakers** on Wednesday met with more than a dozen law enforcement officials from across the **state** to get ideas for legislation that would crack down on **crime** committed by undocumented **immigrants**.

The law enforcement officials said that they often face difficulties in identifying and tracking aliens who commit **crimes**. Many said they are seeing increased activity in metro Atlanta by Asian and Hispanic gangs, often composed largely of **illegal immigrants**. They asked **lawmakers** to help them stamp out fake identification cards.

"We have a problem that's not going to go away and we need to regulate it," said Michael Turner, public safety director for Henry County. Turner said that law enforcement must get rid of the "criminal element" among **illegal immigrants** who prey mostly on other illegals.

President Bush recently jumped into the immigration debate by pushing a policy that would allow workers into the country temporarily to perform certain jobs.

In Georgia, some **lawmakers** say the **state** Legislature should consider stricter policies, such as banning **illegal immigrants** from social services and penalizing companies that hire undocumented laborers.

State Sen. Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock) and **state** Rep. John Lunsford (R-McDonough) hosted the immigration meeting at the **state** Capitol. Rogers said he and other **lawmakers** likely **will** pursue legislation to crack down on fake identification cards and the companies that sell them.

This year, Rogers introduced bills that would prohibit **illegal immigrants** from receiving **state**-funded social services such as food stamps, ban them from obtaining driver's licenses, prevent them from taking classes at Georgia's public colleges and universities, and ensure they do not work on **state**-funded projects.

No action was taken on the measures, but some are likely to be debated next year.

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Rogers said he will focus next year on Senate Bill 170, a measure that would ban illegal immigrants from obtaining driver's licenses. Georgia does not grant driver's licenses to illegal immigrants and new federal legislation passed this year --- the REAL ID act --- further restricts illegal immigrants from getting driver's licenses.

He also said he will push a version of Senate Bill 336, a bill that makes it a crime for a business owner to employ unauthorized illegal laborers.

Senate Majority Leader Tommie Williams (R-Lyons) did not attend the meeting, but said later that Senate Bill 170 has "some merit."

He said the Legislature should help law enforcement officials get fake identification cards off the street and make sure state agencies are not hiring illegal immigrants.

Williams said state lawmakers will take up some "significant legislation" on those issues next year.

D.A. King of Marietta, who runs an immigration watchdog Web site, www.theamericanresistance.com, urged lawmakers at the meeting to tackle illegal immigration head-on by copying federal laws that have not been enforced.

But Adelina Nicholls, president of the Coordinating Council of Latino Community Leaders, said she is "really concerned" about some of the proposals discussed.

Nicholls did not attend the meeting with lawmakers, but said:

"We in the Latino community are willing to work with them on those issues. We'd like a change in immigration rules to help all these people who are working here."

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