

## ***Va. Panel on Immigration Steps Back From Hard Line***

The Washington Post

November 24, 2008 Monday, Met 2 Edition

Copyright 2008 The Washington Post All Rights Reserved



**Distribution:** Virginia

**Section:** A-SECTION; Pg. A01

**Length:** 1008 words

**Byline:** Anita Kumar

Washington Post Staff Writer

**Dateline:** RICHMOND

### **Body**

---

Virginia, known for some of the nation's toughest policies on illegal immigration, appears to be abandoning its hard-line approach as state officials consider proposals to help foreign-born residents assimilate, including increasing the number of English classes.

In the coming weeks, the Virginia Commission on Immigration will send Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D) two dozen recommendations, most of which would help immigrants instead of penalizing them.

Those on both sides of the issue say interest in immigration has waned because of the growing economic crisis, a clearer understanding of the state's limitations on a largely federal issue and backlash at the voting booth.

"I think some reality set in," said state Sen. John C. Watkins (R-Chesterfield), the group's chairman.

Recommendations include shortening the Medicaid residency requirements for certain qualified immigrants, offering in-state tuition to immigrants who meet specific criteria and creating an immigration assistance office.

The commission considered but did not adopt proposals to force immigrants to carry special identification cards, allow hospitals to fingerprint patients who do not pay their bills and require proof of legal residence to be eligible for public assistance.

Virginia officials have spent years addressing the issue of immigration, taking whatever actions they could within the confines of state and federal law. More recently, immigration turned out to be a less popular election issue than some lawmakers had hoped. As a result, state officials appear to be shifting their focus from fighting illegal immigration to assimilating the ever-growing population of legal immigrants.

Del. C. Todd Gilbert (R-Shenandoah), who served on the commission and is staunchly anti-illegal immigration, described the panel's approach to enforcement as "very much watered-down."

## Va. Panel on Immigration Steps Back From Hard Line

"I can't totally disagree that some people are leery of the issue, because maybe it wasn't the wedge issue that some thought it would be," Gilbert said.

In recent years, as Congress repeatedly failed to pass immigration legislation, many states considered immigration bills that addressed employment, identification, law enforcement and public benefits.

In Virginia, Republicans and some Democrats in conservative-leaning districts seized on the issue, unveiling proposals to curb illegal immigration and talking up the cause on the campaign trail. Much of the debate was in Northern Virginia, including Prince William County, where officials curtailed government services to illegal immigrants and increased enforcement.

In 2007, a Washington Post poll found that 9 percent of likely voters in Virginia, and 17 percent in Northern Virginia, considered immigration the most important issue facing the state. But this year only 1 percent of likely voters surveyed listed immigration as a top issue.

During the General Assembly's session this year, the number of immigration bills introduced was the highest in recent years, but most measures died. State and local governments found that they could do little to resolve the issue.

"This is really a federal issue," Watkins said. "They have . . . pushed it down toward the states, and the time has come for them to deal with it. We have no jurisdiction."

Claire Guthrie Gastanaga, who represents several immigrant groups, attributed the diminishing interest to the realization that Virginia is ahead of other states in dealing with illegal immigration. "I think that Virginia has long been at the forefront in acting in this area," she said. "Much of the work was done before the commission ever met."

Virginia was the first state to tighten security on driver's licenses in response to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The state acted after it was discovered that several of the Sept. 11 hijackers had Virginia identification. In 2003, the General Assembly passed legislation requiring applicants to provide proof of citizenship or legal presence in the United States, along with proof of Virginia residency.

Gastanaga said the state now needs to focus on creating a welcoming environment and helping immigrants acclimate to the state.

The Immigration Commission spent more than a year writing recommendations for Kaine after public hearings that included expert testimony and comment from legislators and the Virginia Crime Commission. The proposals would have to be adopted by Kaine, the General Assembly or Congress.

The commission proposed increasing the number of English classes and creating a plan to address the needs of foreign-born residents. It also urged the federal government to compile more complete immigration statistics, increase the number of visas for foreign workers and pass comprehensive immigration legislation.

Of the 12 million illegal immigrants estimated to be in the United States, 250,000 to 300,000 live in Virginia, according to the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington. The U.S. Census Bureau says an additional 440,000 people in Virginia are not U.S. citizens but are in the state legally.

The commission was made up of legislators, local government and law enforcement officials, doctors, lawyers and representatives of various immigrant communities. Members were appointed by Kaine and the General Assembly.

Gilbert and another commission member, Del. Robert G. Marshall (R-Prince William), both advocates of a hard-line approach to illegal immigration, said it was obvious from the start that they would represent the minority view on the panel.

"It was pretty clear the fix was in from the beginning," Gilbert said.

## Va. Panel on Immigration Steps Back From Hard Line

But the Rev. Gerry Creedon, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Arlington County and a commission member, said that the group was objective and that he was pleased with its "positive direction."

Creedon said commission members recognized that in the past some immigration proposals were raised for "political purposes" and could not be enforced. "They wanted credit for taking a tough position, but you knew they wouldn't be implemented," he said.

Polling director Jon Cohen contributed to this report.

## Graphic

---

IMAGE; Del. C. Todd Gilbert, a panel member, said its approach would weaken enforcement of immigration laws.

## Classification

---

**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (95%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (90%); US STATE IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); POLITICAL PARTIES (89%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); PLATFORMS & ISSUES (89%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (79%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (79%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); MIGRATION ISSUES (78%); PUBLIC POLICY (78%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (78%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (78%); MEDICAID (78%); POPULATION GROWTH (77%); INCOME ASSISTANCE (77%); LEGISLATION (77%); TUITION FEES (72%); CONSERVATISM (70%); POLLS & SURVEYS (70%); ECONOMIC CRISIS (55%)

**Industry:** MEDICAID (78%)

**Person:** TIM KAINE (79%)

**Geographic:** VIRGINIA, USA (96%)

**Load-Date:** November 24, 2008