

## **IMMIGRATION LAW ENTERS FLORIDA'S POLITICAL CLASH**

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**Highlight:** GOP hopefuls for governor are trying to outdo each other backing Arizona's law.

### **Body**

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With the Republican gubernatorial primary campaign at a fever pitch and a special legislative session looming, the passionate issue of immigration has taken center stage in the state capital.

Attorney General Bill McCollum joined with Michigan and seven other states Wednesday in opposing the federal government's lawsuit against Arizona's tough new immigration law.

McCollum is fighting off a primary challenge from former health care executive Rick Scott, who has made his support for the Arizona law a central tenet in his campaign for governor.

Earlier in the day, two Republican lawmakers, Sen. Paula Dockery of Lakeland and Rep. Kevin Ambler of Tampa, filed three bills for next week's special session that would make it easier for law enforcement to identify illegal immigrants and more difficult for those without documentation to get public benefits or a state job.

Both moves have political implications, with primary elections in statewide and legislative races on Aug. 24.

McCollum joined a court brief by Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox opposing the U.S. Department of Justice's challenge to the Arizona law. The states argue that the Arizona law does not regulate immigration policy, but merely lets the state enforce current immigration law by asking suspected illegal immigrants for their papers.

"It deals with state sovereignty," McCollum said, arguing Arizona is stepping in because the federal government has not protected the border. "It's a question of where is the line drawn between the state and the federal government's powers."

In its lawsuit, the Justice Department argued that Arizona's law interferes with the federal government's authority to enforce immigration policy.

Like McCollum, Cox is locked in a Republican primary in Michigan's gubernatorial race. All of the other seven attorneys general who signed onto the brief are Republican.

Politically, McCollum's announcement strengthens his immigration bona fides with conservatives while he clashes with Scott. McCollum first called Arizona's law "far out." Then, after it was amended to try to prevent racial profiling, he supported it but said he didn't think Florida needed a similar law.

He has since embraced the idea, having his office help draft an Arizona-style bill for the regular legislative session next year.

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He has stopped short of saying immigration legislation should be considered during next week's special session.

Even though Scott backs the Arizona law, his campaign called McCollum's action an "overtly political move."

Reached in Miami Wednesday, Gov. Charlie Crist steered clear of the issue when asked about McCollum's decision, saying: "That's up to him. I used to be attorney general, and I'll give him his latitude in his office."

Democratic gubernatorial candidate Alex Sink's campaign said she was traveling and couldn't be reached for comment, but issued a prepared statement which said the immigration system is broken and the federal government has not lived up to its obligation to "secure the borders and crack down on employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants."

The Obama administration's lawsuit challenging the Arizona law "does not address the real problem" she said, opposing "amnesty" and calling for comprehensive federal immigration laws. "Any path to citizenship must be reserved for those who obey the law, pay taxes, and go to the back of the line," Sink's campaign said.

Although the Arizona law enjoys wide support in opinion polls, some critics argued that it could have negative consequences if adopted in Florida.

"We have so many citizens in Miami-Dade County that could probably be mistaken for illegal immigrants," said Rep. J.C. Planas, R-Miami, noting strong international finance and tourism industries. "All it takes is one person on a tourist visa who didn't have their passport with them."

He added: "We're going to have a huge, huge incident that could lead to catastrophic results."

His fellow Republican Rep. Julio Robaina of Miami, was blunt about the sudden emergence of immigration in the run-up to the election.

"It's all about votes. It's unfortunate that during campaign times, politics takes priority over good public policy," he said.

Independent gubernatorial candidate Lawton "Bud" Chiles III has said he thinks immigration is a federal issue, and he fears the Arizona law "makes citizens feel like suspects."

Dockery and Ambler say their offices have been flooded with calls about immigration, and that Florida must act quickly, noting that the state has the third-largest population of illegal immigrants, behind California and Texas.

One of their bills would, like Arizona, require officers to check if someone is in the country legally during a lawful arrest or traffic stop. Officers would use the federal electronic verification system, E-Verify, to check on someone's immigration status.

The other two bills would mandate that the state check a person's legal status before he or she is eligible for public benefits or a state job.

"These are very sensible approaches, taking from the Arizona lead, that we can initiate in the state of Florida and get done in the special session," said Ambler, who is in a tough GOP state Senate primary with Hillsborough County Commissioner Jim Norman.

Norman said if Ambler really cared about the issue, he would have addressed it during his eight years in the House instead of in the final days of his tenure.

"This is all about sensationalism and politics," he said.

Although Norman criticized Ambler's timing, he said he too supports an Arizona-style immigration law for Florida.

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It's doubtful whether their bills can even be heard during the special session. The formal proclamation by Crist convening the session only allows lawmakers to consider a constitutional amendment banning oil drilling in state waters.

In order to add other topics to the agenda, including immigration or economic relief to oil spill victims, lawmakers will need a two-thirds vote in each chamber.

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