

Illegal Immigration Issues Attract Little Interest Outside N.Va.

The Washington Post

March 15, 2008 Saturday, Suburban Edition

Copyright 2008 The Washington Post All Rights Reserved



Distribution: Maryland

Section: METRO; Pg. B01

Length: 1123 words

Byline: Anita Kumar

Washington Post Staff Writer

Dateline: RICHMOND, March 14

Body

A divided Virginia General Assembly killed most proposals to crack down on **illegal immigration** during its annual session, despite legislators' repeated pledges to address the growing population in last fall's campaign.

Of the 130 **immigration** bills introduced, only a handful passed before the legislature finished Thursday. The bills that would have penalized **illegal** immigrants died during the session, a sign that the **issue** lacks a sense of urgency statewide.

"I think the problem here is that there are not enough localities that are feeling the same pain as exploding localities like Prince William," said Del. Paul F. Nichols (D-Prince William). "It's frustrating."

Bills that passed will deny bail to **illegal** immigrants charged with a crime, require jails to check the legal status of those taken into custody and prohibit government contractors from hiring **illegal** immigrants.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D), who has often said that **immigration** policy generally should be left up to the federal government, has signed all three bills.

"Bills dealing with behaviors that threaten public safety ought to be taken very seriously," Kaine said. "Beyond that, you've got to be very careful."

The number of **immigration** bills introduced in the two-month legislative session was the highest in recent years. More than 100 originated from the Republican-controlled House, where many were approved before the Democrat-controlled Senate killed them.

"The Democratic majority in the Senate "recognized that there was some demand and something had to be done. What came out was just above window dressing," said Sen. Ken Cuccinelli II (R-Fairfax), who introduced several

Illegal Immigration Issues Attract Little Interest Outside N.Va.

immigration measures. "They wanted to pass just enough to try to release a good portion of the political pressure. Their goal was not to accomplish anything."

Senate Majority Leader Richard L. Saslaw (D-Fairfax) accused House members of trying to use the immigration issue to solicit votes in next year's legislative election.

"I'm not into building guys' campaign brochures, and neither was anybody else," Saslaw said.

Bills that failed would have allowed employers to fire workers for misconduct if they speak a language other than English, banned illegal immigrants from public colleges and universities, required that driver's license exams be conducted in English and required that home buyers prove they are in the country legally to qualify for a mortgage.

Del. Jackson H. Miller (R-Manassas) introduced proposals that would have required defendants to pay for language interpreters in court if convicted and would have forbid taxpayer money from being given to charities that provide services to illegal immigrants.

"There is a different philosophy in the Senate than the House," Miller said. "Most senators said they wanted to get tough on immigration, but then they didn't."

But Nichols said his seven immigration proposals did not make it out of the House. Six of them were never even brought up in a committee, including one that would have required contractors to use an electronic verification system to check workers' legal status.

"The problem apparently hasn't gotten big enough," Nichols said. "We'll stay at it. We're not going to give up."

A Washington Post poll taken a month before the Nov. 6 election showed 75 percent of likely voters in Virginia said immigration was important to their votes in the election for state and local offices.

Republicans across the state, and some Democrats in conservative districts, seized on immigration as a campaign issue, saying they would introduce proposals to reduce the number of illegal immigrants. Much of the debate was in Northern Virginia, including Prince William County, where officials are curtailing some government services to illegal immigrants and increasing enforcement.

"I'm disappointed in the progress [in the legislature] or lack there of," said Corey A. Stewart, chairman of the Prince William Board of County Supervisors and a candidate for lieutenant governor next year.

Attorney General Robert F. McDonnell (R) said he was pleased with the enactment of two bills recommended by the Virginia Crime Commission -- to deny bail to illegal immigrants and require jails to check legal status.

Sen. George L. Barker (D-Fairfax) said that some bills, including his, did not target immigrants directly, but took aim at the problems that can stem from an increasing immigrant population. The legislature passed, and the governor signed, two of Barker's bills that will help localities such as Fairfax combat single-family homes being used as boardinghouses.

"What I've seen on things like this is if legislators see [bills] as addressing an issue and not singling out a class of people, they will support them," he said.

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. An additional 440,000 people in Virginia are not U.S. citizens but are in the state legally, the U.S. Census Bureau says.

At the start of the legislative session, House and Senate leaders outlined their immigration priorities. Only a handful of proposals offered immigrants help, including those that would have created an office of immigration assistance, protected immigrant crime victims and increased the schools' funding formula based on the immigrant population. All three failed.

Illegal Immigration Issues Attract Little Interest Outside N.Va.

Andres Tobar, president of the Virginia Coalition of Latino Organizations, said his group is "disappointed that the legislature failed to enact even one measure with a positive impact on the immigrant community."

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

"We need Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform on the federal level before Virginia hurts herself," said Tim Freilich, legal director of the Legal Aid Justice Center's Immigrant Advocacy Program. "With more than 10 percent of Virginians born outside of the United States, bills that hurt Virginia's immigrants hurt Virginia."

Last year, more than 1,500 immigration bills were introduced in legislatures across the country, about three times as many as in 2006, and 244 were enacted.

Ann Morse, program director for the Immigrant Policy Project at the National Conference of State Legislatures in Washington, said state lawmakers have introduced 600 bills this year but are limited in what they can do to curb illegal immigration.

"It certainly is a testament to the difficulty of the issue," said House Minority Leader Ward L. Armstrong (D-Henry). "States are limited and it underscores the need for the federal government to act."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (93%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); POLITICAL PARTIES (89%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (78%); US STATE IMMIGRATION LAW (78%); POPULATION GROWTH (78%); ELECTIONS (78%); PUBLIC POLICY (78%); IMMIGRATION LAW (78%); CRIMINAL OFFENSES (78%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (78%); APPROVALS (77%); CORRECTIONS (74%); CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS (74%); CHARITIES (73%); CONTRACTS & BIDS (73%); MISCONDUCT (70%); BAIL (69%); PUBLIC CONTRACTING (68%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (60%)

Industry: TRANSLATORS & INTERPRETERS (68%); MORTGAGE LOANS (65%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (60%)

Person: TIM KAINE (79%)

Geographic: VIRGINIA, USA (79%)

Load-Date: March 15, 2008