

Missouri starts to join the big debate over immigration

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

July 6, 2006 Thursday, THIRD EDITION

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Section: METRO; Pg. B3

Length: 776 words

Byline: JO MANNIES

Body

As U.S. Rep. Todd Akin, R-Town and Country, prepares to head for the U.S.-Mexico border 1,237 miles away, Missouri's two major candidates for the U.S. Senate continue their debate on how best to protect that boundary.

Meanwhile, a state House commission is holding public hearings around the state to determine the scope of Missouri's illegal immigration problem and how best to deal with it.

All that activity offers a backdrop to the potential political power this year of the illegal immigration issue -- even in a state that, until recently, hadn't appeared to be much affected.

The latest census figures, for example, reported that Hispanics -- legal and illegal -- made up less than 3 percent of Missouri's population of almost 5.8 million. And state officials told the House immigration commission just last month that illegals didn't appear to be causing much of a state headache.

But that opinion appears to be rapidly changing.

At its latest hearing last week in Kansas City, for example, that House panel was stunned when the police chief estimated that the city was harboring at least 60,000 illegal immigrants, mainly from Mexico.

The commission chairman, state Rep. Ed Emery, R-Lamar, said his group had the chief repeat his statement. That's because his figure is almost twice the statewide estimate of 35,000 illegal immigrants that the commission had been relying on.

If the Kansas City police chief's figure is accurate, the actual number of illegal immigrants in Missouri probably is much greater than officials had believed, Emery said.

He added that it's also become quite clear at the commission's hearings that, "There's really not a way to reach a compromise on this issue."

When it comes to illegal immigrants, passion runs high.

Which helps explain why U.S. Sen. Jim Talent, R-Mo., and his chief Democratic rival, state Auditor Claire McCaskill, seem to have become obsessed with the topic.

On Wednesday, Talent traveled to five Missouri communities -- Warrensburg, Warsaw, Farmington, Potosi and Steelville -- to promote what his campaign calls "his bipartisan border security plan to help secure America's borders with additional manpower, new barriers and high-tech surveillance equipment."

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"Border security is a national security issue," Talent said in a statement. "I don't support amnesty and I voted against the Senate amnesty plan. I believe the Senate should pass a comprehensive border security plan, like the one we've proposed, to protect our borders and our people."

Meanwhile, McCaskill has been on the road for weeks to call for tougher penalties and fines for employers who hire illegal immigrants. She has cited the decline in federal sanctions against such employers, from 909 in 1995 to three in 2004, according to federal figures.

McCaskill contends that drying up the jobs -- and punishing those who provide them -- is the best way to halt the flood of illegal immigrants. That's a point echoed by some local union officials.

Like Talent, McCaskill is focusing on the state's rural, agricultural industry -- where family farmers are increasingly at odds with the growing number of corporate operations.

She has attacked Talent, who sits on the Senate Agricultural Committee, for receiving campaign donations from agricultural corporations with ties to the hiring of illegal workers. His campaign and allies, in turn, have pointed out donations that McCaskill got from some of those firms in her earlier campaigns -- and contribution requests that her campaign or her allies recently made.

He contends that she supports national proposals that "amount to amnesty" for illegal immigrants already in the United States. She says that's not true and emphasizes her support for penalties and punishment.

McCaskill accuses Talent of supporting amnesty for employers who hire illegals. He says that's not true and emphasizes his support for penalties and punishment.

Both say they support a border fence, although Talent places more emphasis on it. And neither is advocating that illegals be rounded up and deported.

As for Akin, illegal immigration is likely to emerge as a topic in his August primary contest against state Rep. Sherman Parker, R-St. Charles County. Both have talked about the recent arrests of illegal immigrants at a construction site in O'Fallon, Mo. Akin is going to El Paso, Texas, this week as part of a congressional entourage to observe firsthand how the border is monitored.

Spokesmen for both state parties say that immigration is emerging as a key issue for their rival bases of voters. As a result, both sides agree: As long as illegal immigration is a hot issue in Congress, it'll be a hot potato back here.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (92%); US CONGRESS (90%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (90%); NATIONAL SECURITY (89%); CITY GOVERNMENT (89%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (89%); BORDER CONTROL (89%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (89%); AMNESTY (88%); POLICE FORCES (88%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (78%); POPULATION SIZE (78%); PUBLIC HEARINGS (77%); POLITICS (77%); US SENATE ELECTIONS (77%); MIGRATION ISSUES (76%); SURVEILLANCE (72%); GOVERNMENT CONTROLLERS & AUDITORS (72%); SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY (71%); FINES & PENALTIES (60%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (50%)

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Industry: GOVERNMENT CONTROLLERS & AUDITORS (72%)

Person: CLAIRE MCCASKILL (58%); W TODD AKIN (58%)

Geographic: KANSAS CITY, MO, USA (91%); MISSOURI, USA (95%); UNITED STATES (94%); MEXICO (92%); NORTH AMERICA (79%)

Load-Date: July 6, 2006

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