

At center stage: immigration: Issue stirs controversy early in session

Pioneer Press, St. Paul, Minn.

March 2, 2006 Thursday

Copyright 2006 Pioneer Press

Distributed by Knight/Ridder Tribune News Service

Section: STATE AND REGIONAL NEWS

Length: 770 words

Byline: Rachel E. Stassen-Berger, Pioneer Press, St. Paul, Minn.

Body

Mar. 2--The 2006 Legislature's session was just an hour old when lawmakers took up one of the most controversial topics swirling around the state Capitol this election year: immigration.

It was just five hours old when a House committee passed a 38-word measure that would require cities to provide information to and cooperate with federal immigration authorities. It may sound benign, but it stirred deep fears and hours of debate and resonated deeply with supporters and opponents. It passed the House Local Government Committee 15-3.

The measure is one of dozens of immigration initiatives with which lawmakers will grapple this short legislative session.

At the start of this year, Gov. Tim Pawlenty proposed a host of laws to crack down on illegal immigration, including one to abolish Minneapolis' and St. Paul's laws barring city employees from routinely asking about immigration status.

A few weeks later, Pawlenty, a Republican, unveiled new initiatives designed to encourage legal immigration in Minnesota, and Monday he lobbied federal officials to let more skilled workers come to the United States legally.

His package of legislative proposals will soon be ready for lawmakers' debate. Next week, the Democratic-majority Senate will unveil its own package of immigration policy proposals.

The hearing Wednesday on local cities' ordinances was not a pretty one and gave some glimpse at what this year's debate will entail. The committee, just back from a seven-month break, barely had time to say their hellos before it dove into immigration policy.

"I don't think any of us want to deal with such a difficult issue, challenging issue on our first day back," said committee chairman Mark Olson, R-Big Lake. He reminded lawmakers and those in the committee room that "it is very important for us to be very sensitive on this issue."

Committee members and those testifying worked to comply with that request, but serious disagreements surfaced.

Rep. Jim Knoblach, who sponsored Wednesday's measure, opened the discussion by saying he believes Minneapolis' and St. Paul's ordinances, which prohibit employees from inquiring about immigration status in many cases, violate federal law and "have the potential to compromise national security."

At center stage: immigration: Issue stirs controversy early in session

Opponents, who filled the hearing room, disagreed. They said the cities' laws were written with federal law in mind and are perfectly legal. Further, they said, if Knoblach's bill becomes law, it would have a detrimental effect on public safety.

Immigrants, Minneapolis and St. Paul police officers told lawmakers, will not talk with police if they feel they could be asked about their visa status.

"It's them knowing that they could potentially be asked that question. It would destroy the trust we have with them," said Minneapolis Police Chief Bill McManus, one of 18 people to testify against the bill. "You can envision an entire section of the city that will not report crimes. These entire sections of the city will become havens" for criminals.

The measure that passed Wednesday stopped short of requiring local law enforcement officials to ask about immigration status.

Supporters and opponents suggested that's one reason it may not be effective.

"This is an extremely modest step, but it is a step," said Olson, who voted for the bill but said he wished it had gone further.

Ann Lenczewski, DFL-Bloomington, who also voted for the measure, said she didn't believe its passage would force Minneapolis or St. Paul to scale back their ordinances.

The police chiefs from both cities said their officers do look into potential immigration violations when dealing with someone who has committed a felony and do cooperate with federal immigration officials on terrorism and other issues.

But special agent-in-charge Mark Cangemi of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement said since Minneapolis and St. Paul passed their ordinances, he's noticed a decrease in the number of calls and the amount of help his agency gets from the two cities.

"There is a chilling effect," said Cangemi, one of two people to testify in support of the measure.

Rachel E. Stassen-Berger can be reached at rstassen-berger@pioneerpress.com. Online: Should Minneapolis and St. Paul be allowed to have ordinances that prevent local police officers from enforcing federal immigration laws? Go to www.twincities.com to participate in an online poll.

Copyright (c) 2006, Pioneer Press, St. Paul, Minn. Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News. For information on republishing this content, contact us at (800) 661-2511 (U.S.), (213) 237-4914 (worldwide), fax (213) 237-6515, or e-mail reprints@krtinfo.com.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: SP

Acc-No: 20060302-SP-0302-At-center-stage-immigration

Subject: IMMIGRATION (91%); LEGISLATION (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); US STATE GOVERNMENT

At center stage: immigration: Issue stirs controversy early in session

(90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); **IMMIGRATION** REGULATION & POLICY (89%); ORDINANCES (89%); PUBLIC POLICY (89%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (78%); POLITICAL DEBATES (78%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (78%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2012 (77%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (77%); CITY GOVERNMENT (76%); POLICE FORCES (76%); CIVIL SERVICES (76%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (74%); LOBBYING (73%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (72%); NATIONAL SECURITY (50%)

Ticker: NYSE:STA

Industry:

Person: TIM PAWLENTY (72%)

Geographic: SAINT PAUL, MN, USA (93%); MINNEAPOLIS, MN, USA (91%); MINNESOTA, USA (94%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: March 3, 2006

End of Document