

6 quit Perdue's Latino board; No input on law on illegals cited

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Body

Six members of Gov. Sonny **Perdue's** 17-member **Latino** Commission for a New Georgia have resigned because they say the governor did not seek their advice before signing the state's new anti-illegal immigration measure into **law**.

The Georgia Security and Immigration Compliance Act, which targets illegal immigrants and the people who employ them, created heated debate during the 2006 legislative session.

Supporters argued that the complicated measure is necessary because the federal government has failed to secure the borders, allowing waves of illegal immigrants to flood Georgia --- estimates range from 250,000 to 800,000.

But critics say those illegal immigrants underpin many industries, take jobs Americans won't do, and contribute to the nation's economy.

Most of the **Latino** Commission members who stepped down --- including one member who **quit** Wednesday --- wrote in their resignation letters that Perdue should have tapped them for their knowledge of issues affecting Georgia's Hispanic community.

Some expressed their opposition to the illegal immigration legislation, but others simply said they were upset that the governor did not consult them. "The fact that **no** feedback or opinions were elicited from this '**Latino** Commission' make it very obvious to me that this commission is mere window dressing," Alex Salgueiro, president of the Savannah Restaurants Corp., wrote in his April 18 resignation letter. "As a dedicated Republican and a citizen of Georgia, I do not feel it is a good use of my valuable time to serve on a sham commission."

Perdue created the commission in July 2003 to serve as an advisory **board** to help develop minority-owned small businesses and to lure international companies to create jobs and conduct business in Georgia.

The commission members also were supposed to advise the governor on public policy issues such as education, health care and economic development.

Heather Hedrick, a spokeswoman for Perdue, said that commission members have been working with the governor on a possible teacher exchange-program with Puerto Rico.

The commission meets quarterly, and members often serve as surrogates for Perdue at various community events. They also meet and talk with Hispanic media outlets and interest groups on the governor's behalf, Hedrick said.

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Sara Gonzalez, president and CEO of the Georgia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, was one of the first commission members to step down because she felt her input was not sought on Senate Bill 529.

"I thought that the role of the commission was to offer the governor counsel or advice," Gonzalez said Wednesday. "I felt that was not the case. It was not happening."

Hedrick said that while the governor did not personally meet with the commission members on Senate Bill 529, his staff solicited opinions from the commission on the anti-illegal immigration measure through an e-mail sent March 30.

"We are disappointed that these members of the Latino Commission have resigned, especially because Senate Bill 529 is not an anti-immigrant bill," Hedrick said Wednesday. "We are a welcoming state --- but we're also a law-abiding state. We welcome everyone to come to Georgia --- but we ask they use the front door, not the back door."

At least one commission member sent Perdue a note expressing his support of the measure. "This is my home, I feel that anyone coming to live and work here should abide by our rules set down by so many Godly people so many years ago," commission member Gilbert Esparza wrote in a April 19 e-mail message. "Please accept my thanks to you for taking a stand."

Under the law, adult illegal immigrants may not obtain some taxpayer-funded services.

But their children are exempt, and adults will still have access to some medical services, such as emergency care, treatment for communicable diseases, and prenatal care. The children of illegal immigrants may still attend public school --- a right guaranteed by the federal courts.

The bill also contains tough provisions for human trafficking and holds employers responsible for hiring illegal immigrants.

Maritza Pichon, executive director of the Latin American Association, said Wednesday that she is weighing whether to remain on the commission. "There are a lot of tensions around the issue of immigration," she said. "I think it existed on the Latino Commission as well as in the mainstream. It's been difficult to reconcile."

She said that she is concerned about the group's ability to function with so many members resigning.

"It's been a challenging time, there has been frustration about the bill. The commission ideally would be working together to make some strong recommendations. It was created to be an advisory body to the governor. If the commission members don't feel they can achieve that --- it doesn't make sense to dedicate the time and effort."

Graphic

Photo: A spokeswoman for Gov. Sonny Perdue says input was sought by e-mail.

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