

## **Rural Hispanic lawmaker a first for state; Republican wants to see immigration laws strictly enforced.**

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### **Body**

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Fort Valley --- Once he is sworn in today, Tony Sellier will become Georgia's first-ever Hispanic state lawmaker to represent a rural area.

The Crawford County Republican was born in Trinidad, grew up in Venezuela and immigrated to the United States at age 15.

Last year, during the election for his Middle Georgia district in the House of Representatives, he campaigned on immigration reform. But don't expect him to be in lockstep with other Hispanic politicians and lobbying groups on that issue.

Sellier (pronounced "sell-yay") supports Georgia's sweeping legislation targeting illegal immigrants and those who employ them. Senate Bill 529, much of which becomes law July 1, requires state and local agencies to verify the legal status of adults applying for taxpayer-funded benefits in Georgia. Several Hispanic groups and politicians have condemned the bill.

Sellier said the federal government has failed to stop immigrants from entering the country illegally and taking advantage of publicly funded services, so Georgia must enforce measures like Senate Bill 529 to protect taxpayers. He also opposes amnesty for illegal immigrants and supports pending legislation that would prohibit Georgia from issuing official documents and forms in any language other than English.

Sellier said he plans to work with the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials and Georgia's two other Hispanic state lawmakers, state Reps. Pedro Marin (D-Duluth) and David Casas (R-Lilburn). But he said he will not necessarily agree with them on every issue.

"I can't be pigeonholed," said Sellier, 61, who retired last year as an executive with Blue Bird Corp., a school bus manufacturing company. "I represent the people who sent me to Atlanta. I'm going to vote for my constituents."

Sellier is one of 30 freshman state representatives and senators who will be sworn in today, the first day of this year's 40-day legislative session. When he takes office, Sellier will become Georgia's fourth-ever Hispanic

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**lawmaker.** Georgia's **first Hispanic state** senator, Sam Zamarripa (D-Atlanta), decided not to seek re-election last year. Sellier won election to his seat in November with just over 68 percent of the vote against his Democratic opponent, Beth Perera. He campaigned on protecting military jobs, looking out for farmers and improving public schools. He is also a cancer survivor who advocates for cancer research and detection.

Sellier said his district relies heavily on **Hispanic** migrant farm workers. It includes Crawford County and parts of Bibb, Houston and largely **rural** Lamar, Monroe, Peach and Upson counties. During a recent tour of his sprawling cattle farm, Sellier pointed to a building on his neighbor's farm that serves as temporary living quarters for migrant workers. He said he can sometimes hear their traditional Mexican music through his living room window.

In the November election, all of the counties in Sellier's district voted for **Republican** Gov. Sonny Perdue, who signed Senate Bill 529 in April. Sellier's pickup truck carries a Perdue for governor bumper sticker.

Of the 45,546 residents in Sellier's district, only 977 or 2.1 percent are **Hispanic**, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Sellier argues the number is much higher now. Hispanics, he said, outnumber others at the Catholic church he attends in Fort Valley.

For months, illegal **immigration** has been a hot-button issue in Georgia, which has one of the nation's fastest-growing illegal immigrant populations, estimated at 470,000 by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Sellier's late father, who was of French descent, served in the British Army in World War II and then immigrated from Trinidad to Venezuela to work for Mobil Oil. Sellier's mother is of Italian and Venezuelan descent. Sellier grew up in Venezuela speaking Spanish as his **first** language.

Fearing instability in Venezuela's government, Sellier's parents sent him to Central Florida in 1960 to attend a Catholic boarding school. Sellier said he will never forget his plane ride, which stopped briefly in Havana to pick up Cuban refugees.

"When we got outside of Miami, the captain came on the radio and he said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we have just entered American airspace. You are free at last,' " said Sellier, who became a U.S. citizen in 1973. Sellier said he remembers the Cuban refugees exiting the plane and "kissing the ground and hugging their relatives."

Sellier says he takes a compassionate view of illegal **immigration**. He opposes deporting illegal immigrants en masse and building a wall along the Mexican border. Rather, Sellier said, the federal government should supply them with paperwork they can fill out to re-enter the country legally after returning to their native countries for the holidays. He also **wants** to protect them from exploitation by unscrupulous employers who don't pay them fair wages.

"I'm not promoting that every immigrant who comes here become an American citizen," he said. "But they have to become part of the American dream so they can negotiate their status in life on an equal footing with everyone else. When you are not legal, you are in the shadows."

The Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials recently named Sellier to its board of directors despite their differences. The association has opposed Senate Bill 529.

"SB 529 to me was a smoke-and-mirrors bill that did absolutely nothing other than perpetuate fear and more of the status quo. It doesn't solve anything," said Jerry Gonzalez, executive director of GALEO. As for Sellier's views and his place within GALEO, Gonzalez said, "There is room for disagreement on these issues."

## Graphic

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Photo: MIKKI K. HARRIS / StaffTony Sellier and his wife, Judy, settle into their temporary home, an Atlanta condo owned by former **state** Rep. Robert Ray./ImageData\*

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