

DRIVER'S LICENSE BILL HITS SNAG;

VOTE ON MEASURE FOR UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS DELAYED

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Body

Legislation to let as many as 2 million undocumented immigrants apply for driver's licenses stalled in the Assembly on Thursday after Senate Democrats raised last-minute concerns about fraud.

"We want to be sure we're not encouraging identity theft or fraud, or setting up a system that is going to impinge on people's civil rights and would cost a fortune," said Sen. Debra Bowen, D-Redondo Beach.

Still, the bill's sponsor Sen. Gil Cedillo, D-Los Angeles, said he is confident the measure will be successful once his colleagues have had time to review the details. The bill could come up for a vote again as early as Monday.

The driver's license bill has also become ensnared in recall politics. After twice vetoing similar measures because of security concerns, Gov. Gray Davis announced last month that he would sign this year's less restrictive bill in a "heartbeat." Davis reiterated his support in Los Angeles on Thursday.

Davis' reversal has sparked criticism from Republicans, who accuse the governor of pandering to his Democratic base to defeat the Oct. 7 recall vote.

On the Assembly floor Thursday, Republican Russ Bogn of Yucaipa criticized Democrats for fast-tracking the bill, which has fewer safeguards than last year.

"Are you really willing to compromise the safety of California for a measure that is only intended to extend or save governor Davis' failed political career?" he said.

For five years, Cedillo has pressed to give undocumented immigrants the ability to apply for licenses and buy car insurance. Cedillo contends that California's roads would be safer if immigrants were licensed.

Under current law, residents must provide a Social Security number that can be validated through the Social Security Administration. Under Cedillo's bill, applicants could instead use a federal taxpayer identification number from the Internal Revenue Service.

But in a letter to the Department of Motor Vehicles this month, the IRS warned of "potential security risks."

To win support from a long list of law enforcement officials, though, the bill includes the creation of a high-tech, digital database of fingerprints that would allow the Department of Motor Vehicles to validate an applicant's identity.

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Despite that, the California State Sheriffs' Association remained opposed to the measure Thursday, because of the cost of fingerprinting and because taxpayer numbers are "easily obtained and difficult to verify."

Davis' office defended the revised legislation.

"The governor listens to the experts," said spokesman Russ Lopez, "and their opinion is that this is a bill that will make our streets safer."

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