

WHAT'S DRIVING THE OPPOSITION?

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Body

HOMELAND SECURITY

A BILL to make it easier for an illegal alien to get a drivers license may become the victim of Sept. 11. The measure sailed through the Missouri House but faces rough seas in the Senate.

The reason the bill is hung up is that the 19 hijackers on Sept. 11 had legitimate drivers licenses or other forms of identification that allowed them to move freely before the attack. There's little proof that being denied drivers licenses would have stopped these men. After all, all but three of the 19 had valid visas. But the ease with which the 19 were able to get identification has raised questions about boosting scrutiny and standards for issuing licenses.

House Bill 1811 would ease the rules under which licenses are issued to illegal immigrants. To get a license, an alien would be allowed to supply the state with either a Social Security number or an individual taxpayer identification number from the Internal Revenue Service. Critics argue that those numbers are handed out too freely, and that the relaxed rule would allow the licenses to fall in the hands of terrorists.

In reality, the bill is primarily intended to help illegal Mexican immigrants who come to this country for a better life. When Rep. Henry C. Rizzo, D-Kansas City, introduced HB1811, he saw it partly as a way to help solve the problem of unlicensed immigrants who cause traffic accidents and their lack of insurance or the money to cover the damage to people and property. Mr. Rizzo dismisses critics who say the bill would cause illegal immigrants to flock to Missouri and would put more irresponsible immigrant drivers on the road.

"My response is that they're already here," he replies.

Denying aliens drivers licenses in Missouri is no guarantee that they won't drive without licenses or won't get them in other states. But by issuing drivers licenses, the state can ensure that the drivers have learned the rules of the road and passed a driving test. The bill is beneficial because it meets the twin goals of giving immigrants access to drivers licenses while improving the safety of the roads.

But the legislation may never get out of committee in the Senate due to national security fears, however irrational those fears might be. Some police are comfortable with the bill because they say a license would give them a record of an illegal immigrant's stay in this country. Moreover, the state's home security office feels the bill includes safeguards so that licenses don't end up in the wrong hands. If this proposal is good enough for law enforcement officials, it should be good enough for lawmakers.

Notes

EDITORIALS

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