

Rogers to revise immigration bill; Fewer employers would be affected

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Byline: JIM THARPE

Body

A new illegal immigration proposal will be revised so that only employers with a certain number of workers would be required to verify their legal status, the bill's author said Thursday.

State Sen. Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock), who has drafted the Georgia Security and Immigration Compliance Act, said he also will specify that the verification process --- set to begin in 2007--- will not apply to employees already on the payroll, but only to workers who apply for jobs after the provision goes into effect.

"We don't want to get involved with a person who hires someone to clean their house," said Rogers, whose draft proposal was made public in Wednesday's Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "We're talking about larger employers. We're still trying to come up with the number of employees that would trigger that provision."

Rogers plans to introduce the legislation early next week, and it is expected to be the main bill that lawmakers debate on the topic.

Illegal immigration is expected to take center stage in the Legislature in the next few weeks. Those seeking get-tough legislation say illegal immigrants sap resources from legal residents and state programs. Opponents argue they fill unwanted jobs that help underpin the state's economy.

Estimates on the number of illegal immigrants in Georgia vary widely, from about 250,000 to 800,000.

About 80 percent of Georgians responding to a recent Zogby International poll said employers who hire illegal workers should be punished. Some 82 percent said the Legislature should take on the immigration issue.

Charles Gerber, 56, who sells building materials, said he likes Rogers' comprehensive approach. He applauded the Legislature for confronting an issue he feels the federal government has shirked.

"I can't understand why people who are in America legally have to pay the taxes and illegal immigrants use the services," said Gerber, who lives in Fulton County. "That doesn't make any sense."

Rogers' bill would deny state and local services to illegal immigrants, set tough penalties for "human trafficking" --- bringing illegal workers across the border --- and prevent public agencies from contracting with people in the country illegally.

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Rogers met Thursday with a critic of his plan, state Sen. Sam Zamarripa (D-Atlanta). Zamarripa, chairman of the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials, said the two reached consensus on several portions of the proposal. Still, Zamarripa said it is unlikely he will vote for it. He has argued that fixes to the **immigration** problem need to take place at the federal level.

"But opposing it now will not consume all of my time," Zamarripa said. "[Still,] he's trying to repair with an imperfect tool kit a problem that requires an army of plumbers and electricians."

The business community, meanwhile, was still warily eyeing the proposal.

Joe Fleming, senior vice president for governmental affairs for the Georgia Chamber of Commerce, said his organization has not taken a formal position on **Rogers' bill**. But Fleming said the concept of employee verification is problematic.

"The federal government hasn't been able to solve this problem," Fleming said. "I would doubt medium and small businesses can."

The federal government already has a system that allows **employers** to call a number to verify Social Security numbers given by prospective employees. But it is slow, and people on every side of the issue have called for expanding the program and making it quicker. **Employers** have complained that they can't tell whether the documents prospective hires present are real or fake.

Jon Schwalls, director of operations for Southern Valley Fruit and Vegetable in Colquitt County in South Georgia, didn't necessarily oppose verification, but said, "We don't need anything that is burdensome for **employers**."

Schwalls questioned whether illegal immigrants take jobs from Americans. He said about 10 American workers generally apply for his 500 harvesting jobs. Of those, he said, three show up for work, and none makes it past the second day.

Rogers' proposal was roundly criticized at the 2006 Annual Hispanic Caucus Breakfast on Thursday, even as the event's sponsor, the Georgia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, tried to distance itself from the topic.

Sara Gonzalez, president of the Hispanic chamber, said a paper critical of **Rogers'** proposal distributed at the breakfast did not come from her group. "Sen. **Rogers** is a reasonable man. I'm sure things will work out," she said.

Zamarripa told the meeting he plans to introduce three **bills** on illegal **immigration**, including one going after purveyors of fake documents: the unregulated "notarios" who, he said, promise everything from green cards to work permits for a steep fee, but in the end just hoodwink people seeking legal status.

Zamarripa's other initiatives would establish a state office of **immigration** management and information, which would help implement federal rules, and would create a blue-ribbon commission to study the issue.

Staff writers Teresa Borden and Matt Kempner contributed to this article.

Graphic

Photo: BEN GRAY / StaffSen. Chip **Rogers'** new **bill** requires the state to devise a system to require that **employers** verify workers' status.

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