

Debate on over bill to give driver's licenses to illegal immigrants

Davis at center of issue that became more complex after Sept. 11 attacks.

By DON THOMPSON

The Associated Press

SACRAMENTO — As governors nationwide struggle to balance the security of driver's licenses against their residents' rights and convenience, nowhere is the debate more pointed or political than in California.

Lawmakers first sent Gov. Gray Davis a bill a year ago granting driver's licenses to illegal immigrants who have filed for a change in their immigration status. But they withdrew the measure after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

They sent it to him again this year — but he insisted on a series of additional

safeguards, including fingerprint background checks and cooperation with the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service, before he would consider signing it.

Now Davis' staff is researching whether the amendments adopted in the closing hours of the legislative session are enough to satisfy his demands. Senators altered Davis' proposed language before sending him the bill.

"We understand (the new bill) has all the points that the governor needed. It's a word here, a phrase there" that is under review to see if it would affect the law and force a veto, spokesman Russ Lopez said Friday. "We have to make sure that people who don't deserve this privilege, this license, that come here to do us harm, don't get their licenses."

But it applies more broadly, Lopez said.

"Someone who has murdered someone, someone who beat his wife severely, someone who has embezzled someone, those people wouldn't be eligible for citizenship through INS," Lopez said. "Why should we give them

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a driver's license?"

The INS, not the state Department of Motor Vehicles, should be making those decisions, countered Michele Waslin, immigrant policy analyst for National Council of La Raza.

"A lot of DMV people are acting like vigilantes, thinking they're going to stop immigrants," she said.

Nor would California's pending bill have done anything to prevent the terrorist attacks, she argued: "Most of them had valid licenses, and a really determined terrorist is not going to let driver's license restrictions stop them."

The alternative to requiring motorists to have training and insur-

ance, no matter their legal status, is to have "unlicensed, uninsured drivers fleeing the scene of accidents," Waslin argued. "These end up hurting a lot of people who are not terrorists."

Davis' insistence on sharing state information with the INS is particularly troubling and perhaps counterproductive, she suggested.

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little thing."

Though Davis says he wants to sign a bill, critics say he is seeking cover to veto it without antagonizing the state's Hispanic community in an election year.

They also have accused him of trying to tie the measure to a second controversial bill of importance to the state's large Mexican population, this one strengthening farmworkers' ability to win union contracts when negoti-

ations drag out.

Lopez denied any connection.

California has had the most extensive immigration driver's license debate of any state, said Ann Morse, an analyst with the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Since the attacks, legislators in 45 states introduced bills, and nearly two-dozen states, including California, have taken steps to make their driver's licenses tougher to obtain illegally.



Davis



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