



Wednesday, June 4, 2008

Immigrant bills hit Senate panel snag; Profiling fears raised, legislation delayed

By Ed Anderson
Capital bureau

BATON ROUGE -- A package of bills designed to crack down on illegal immigrants faltered in the Senate Judiciary B Committee Tuesday when two lawmakers said the effort will lead to ethnic profiling and the author of the legislation could not answer legal questions on how the measures would be policed. Rep. Brett Geymann, R-Lake Charles, asked the panel to delay action on the three bills until next week when he can have a lawyer with him to help answer the questions of committee members. Geymann said he will have some amendments to address the concerns of some committee members.

Sen. Danny Martiny, R-Kenner, the panel's chairman, said he will reschedule the bills but questioned how police would be able to enforce them and how district attorneys would be able to prosecute them. Among Geymann's three bills, the ones dealing with transporting and harboring illegal immigrants would have allowed those arrested to assert as a defense at trial that they were working as an attorney or paralegal in taking an illegal immigrant to a hearing, or are members of a nonprofit organization taking the illegal immigrant to a church or doctor. Geymann didn't get far into the discussion of the transportation bill when he was showered with questions from Martiny and others on how the bills would work and what police would have to do once they stop someone allegedly in the country illegally. Geymann said the bill is not designed to hurt the immigrant. "We want to go after the guy with the trailer who brings people in," he said. The debate played out in a committee room packed with Hispanic residents of the state.

"We are going to start profiling if they look a little different or speak broken English or don't speak the king's Cajun English?" said Sen. Butch Gautreaux, D-Morgan City, a committee member who represents parts of French-speaking Louisiana. "It seems like you are going to capture a lot of people," said Sen. Eric LaFleur, D-Ville Platte.

Ernesto Schweikert III, the general manager of Spanish-language radio and television stations in the New Orleans area, said the bills send a wrong message and may hurt tourism to the state in the Hispanic community. "Who is going to help rebuild the city?" he asked. "Latinos are the only ones who will do work nobody else wants to do." Rep. Juan LaFonta, D-New Orleans, a lawyer and chairman of the Legislative Black Caucus, testified before the panel, urging the bills be killed. The "package of bills creates racial profiling situations," LaFonta said. "All it is doing is sending a clear message to the immigrant community 'Do Not Come to Louisiana.' There is no way these bills should see the light of day. . . . It (the package) will hurt the rebuilding" from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

. Ed Anderson can be reached at eanderson@timespicayune.com or (225) 342-5810.