

House approves immigration reform legislation

By Rep. Debbie Buckner

After a lengthy debate March 3, a majority of the House of Representatives voted to approve legislation intended to crack down on illegal immigration in Georgia by giving law enforcement more authority to investigate people's citizenship status and by penalizing businesses who hire undocumented workers.

Using a law enacted last year in Arizona, which borders Mexico, as a model, members of a special legislative committee that held several hearings last fall on the immigration issue drafted HB 87. The bill would authorize law enforcement officers to determine the immigration status of someone they have stopped or detained for a possible violation if they suspect the person is an illegal immigrant. The person could then be held by police for verification of their immigration status even after the basis for the original probable cause for the stop has expired.

Under the proposal, most business owners would have to provide evidence they have used the federal E-verify system to check the citizenship status of new employees. Using fake identification in order to gain employment would become a felony offense punishable by up to 15 years in prison. HB 87 would also provide Georgia residents an ability to sue a police force or other government agency in Superior Court if they believe the agency is not enforcing the immigration law.

I voted against the measure out of concern it will adversely affect Georgia businesses, with an especially negative impact on the agriculture and tourism industries, increase demands upon local law enforcement resources leading to a substantial increase in property taxes, and spawn lawsuits. There is also evidence that the E-Verify system gives unreliable results a high percentage of the time – like the immigration problem altogether, this is something that the federal government needs to fix.

After a vote of 113-56 in favor of passage, HB 87 now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

HOPE Scholarship Changes: House members voted March 1 to approve legislation that proposes changes to the HOPE Scholarship program to help offset its financial deficit caused by college tuition increasing faster than Lottery revenues. Most HOPE recipients would see their benefits reduced to 90 percent of their tuition costs under HB 326. That percentage would increase or decrease in future years based on the rise or fall of Lottery proceeds. Students who come out of high school with a 3.7 grade point average (GPA) and at least a 1,200 Scholastic Aptitude Test score and are able to maintain a 3.3 GPA in college would retain a full HOPE Scholarship for tuition. Other changes include a low-interest loan program for students who need more financial aid, reduced sales commissions for Lottery retailers and limits on salary bonuses for Lottery employees. HOPE would no longer cover book costs or student fees under HB 326, which now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

Sex Trafficking Enforcement: House members voted March 2 to approve legislation that would increase criminal penalties for those guilty of trafficking young women for sex. HB 200 proposes a minimum prison sentence of 10 to 20 years and/or a fine of up to \$100,000. If the victim is under 18 years old and is found to have been coerced or deceived into being trafficked, the prison sentence would be increased to between 25 and 50 years. HB 200 now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

Child Safety Seats: The House voted March 1 in favor of legislation that would increase the maximum age that children are required to ride in car safety seats from 6 to 8 years. HB 279 would require the use of a child booster seat up to age 8, with an exemption for children who are taller than 4 feet, 9 inches. Similar legislation has also passed in the Senate.

Public Health Department: House members voted March 4 to approve legislation that would establish a new state Department of Public Health, governed by a state board whose members would be appointed by the Governor. The public health function currently is a division of the Department of Community Health. The sponsor of HB 214 said the agency would operate more efficiently as a separate department reporting directly to the Governor. The measure now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

Rules of Evidence: House members voted Feb. 28 in favor of legislation that would update and revise the rules of evidence that attorneys must follow in court. HB 24 would bring Georgia's standards in line with federal court rules of evidence. The measure now goes to the Senate for its consideration.

Horse Racing: A proposed constitutional amendment that would legalize pari-mutuel wagering on horse races in Georgia has been favorably reported by the House Regulated Industries Committee. HR 186 provides that revenue generated by the wagers would be dedicated to funding HOPE scholarships, the pre-kindergarten program and the state's network of trauma care facilities. Constitutional amendments require two-thirds approval by both the House and Senate and ratification by a majority of voters in the next General Election.

General Assembly Online: Throughout the session, you can read the details and check the status of legislation and watch live broadcasts of House and Senate proceedings online at www.legis.ga.gov. Lawmakers were scheduled to return to the Capitol on Monday, March 7, for Day 25 of the 40-day session.

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