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HOW I VOTED: IMMIGRATION REFORM

FOR

Early in the 2008 session the House passed its first big piece of legislation: immigration reform. I voted for the bill. It was a monster in scope, with no fewer than 16 different sections. I will do my best to hit the highlights, recognizing that a thorough analysis would take many pages:

Government Contracts: The bill requires that all companies that do business with the state verify the immigration status of their employees. If they do not, they would pay a penalty based upon the size of their contract or subcontract with the state.

Public Benefits: The bill would deny public benefits to illegal immigrants, with exceptions for things such as disaster relief, emergency medical care, and criminal domestic violence services. Also, children are not to be denied services, as the US Supreme Court has ruled that denying basic benefits to children violates their rights of due process.

Employer Tax Deductions: Two separate parts of the bill deal with the manner by which employers deduct the wages and salaries of their workers, so that only companies that confirm the immigration status of their workers can take the full tax deduction for paying them.

Harboring & Trafficking: It would now be a crime to be in the business of bringing undocumented immigrants into the state, or helping them stay here illegally.

Checking Status of Arrested Persons: The bill requires that local law enforcement check the immigration status of folks they arrest. It would also now be permissible for judges to set higher bond amounts for illegals.

Higher Education: Illegal immigrants would not be allowed to attend state-funded colleges and universities. They are permitted to attend private schools, but would not be entitled to receive any publicly-funded scholarships.

Some people would criticize the new law as being too harsh...and others would say it does not go far enough. I see it as a balanced approach that promises relief for a serious problem.

Yes, private businesses are charged with taking some action to help solve the immigration problem, but for the largest majority of companies, compliance with the law will be very simple. (And, importantly, business owners can not be held responsible if a worker uses false documents to get hired.) And the law will help level the playing field between businesses that play by the rules, and those few that choose to break the law and knowingly employ illegals.

Plus – and for me this was critical --- companies are only responsible for their own employees and not those of their subcontractors or suppliers. This avoids the bizarre situation of a business owner having, technically, to confirm the immigration status of every employer at Wal-Mart or Home Depot.

And yes, illegals are denied some basic services, as well as the opportunity to go to college. While that on its face might seem cruel or even un-Christian to some, the intent of the bill was to remove some of the biggest incentives that currently exist for people to come to this country illegally.

That is what lies at the heart of this bill: letting people know that there is a risk in coming here illegally. Just as importantly, this bill should send the message that there really is (and should be), a benefit to coming here in the proper manner.

I supported this bill, and voted for it. Not only does it have merit on its own, I see it as part of a larger effort to focus attention on keeping the economy as healthy as possible. My hope is that, if there are jobs in our state and County being taken up by illegal immigrants, then this bill is one way to make sure our lawful residents have access to those jobs.

The bill is now in the Senate.