

State likely to address more immigration issues in '12

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A Georgia federal judge heard arguments this week over whether Georgia's new Arizona-style immigration law should stand or fall. The judge heard arguments on both the constitutionality and the practicality of enforcing the law.

The law closely mirrors Mississippi's 2011 Senate Bill 2179 - which, like the Georgia law, would have required county and municipal law enforcement officers to investigate the immigration status of certain suspects and to arrest and jail illegal immigrants. The bill failed in Mississippi when House and Senate negotiators could not agree on the law.

Those disagreements were heightened when the Mississippi Municipal League raised legitimate concerns that the bill was an "unfunded mandate" from the Legislature that would increase costs on county and municipal governments and could raise taxes.

The Mississippi bill required housing illegal immigrants in county jails and transporting them to the nearest U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Louisiana. But the bill provided only \$20 a day for local governments to pay the costs of incarceration and no funds for transportation, medical expense and host of other potential costs.

Texas state legislators are voting this week on similar legislation. With almost 9.5 million Hispanic residents comprising nearly 38 percent of the state's population, the outcome of this law in Texas will be closely watched nationally.

If adopted, Texans would join citizens in Arizona, Utah, Georgia, Indiana, Alabama and South Carolina as states that have adopted broadly scaled state laws addressing the enforcement of federal immigration laws.

Clearly, immigration is not a problem in Mississippi of the size and scope that it is in Texas and Arizona.

The 2006 Mississippi immigration study from former state auditor and current Lt. Gov. Phil Bryant found that while illegal immigrants indeed paid \$44.2 million in taxes, they cost state taxpayers \$69.3 million annually for health care, education and prison costs - accounting for what Bryant said was a net loss to state taxpayers of some \$25 million per year.

Bryant's prohibitive lead in the Republican gubernatorial primary - and in the overall 2011 gubernatorial campaign - has no small foundation in his longstanding "get tough" stance on immigration - an issue that resonates with both tea party conservatives and establishment Republicans alike.

But the national pro-immigration group the Immigration Policy Center conducted its own study and offered a different analysis. The IPC study found that "unauthorized" immigrants produce \$583 million in state economic activity - including 4,680 jobs and pay \$44.2 million in taxes.

The IPC report offers the following claims and findings:

Immigrants and their children are growing shares of Mississippi's population. The foreign-born share of Mississippi's population rose from 0.8 percent in 1990, to 1.4 percent in 2000, to 2.1 percent in 2008, according to the census. Mississippi was home to 60,555 immigrants in 2008. And 30.4 percent of immigrants (or 18,419 people) in Mississippi were naturalized U.S. citizens in 2008 - meaning that they are eligible to vote.

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And after the city of Jackson's recent "sanctuary city" stance, look for the 2012 legislative session to certainly import this legislation from Texas - a measure targeting "sanctuary cities" by expanding the federal Secure Communities program and a requirement that proof of citizenship be show when applying for a driver's license.

Bottom line, more anti-illegal immigration legislation is almost certain to hit Mississippi's legislative hopper next year.

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