Arizona's State-Owned Mexico Border Fence Attracts Donors From Across U.S.

Published on Tue, Aug 02, 2011

Arizona, whose immigration law sparked a lawsuit by the Obama administration and national boycotts, aims to collect tens of millions of dollars in private donations to build a border fence with inmate labor.

The plan, created by lawmakers and signed into law by Republican Governor Jan Brewer in April, would turn donations over to a group of Republican legislators, political appointees and four county sheriffs who have criticized U.S. efforts to combat illegal immigration. They say the fence is needed to stop an "invasion" that may include violent criminals and Middle Eastern terrorists disguised as Mexicans.

"Arizona once more has to step in and do a job the federal government won't do," Republican state Senator Steve Smith, who sponsored the bill, said in a telephone interview. He said he believes the Obama administration has failed to secure the border and has now given up. "It is a massive invasion on our social and economic systems. Nobody can deny that."

The campaign is ratcheting up rhetoric between the state and the federal government over border security. It is modeled after a similar effort by Brewer that taps into the same nationwide discontent over U.S. policy to pay for the defense of Arizona's immigration law. The campaign, Keep Arizona Safe, has raised more than \$3.8 million from about 45,000 donations since June 2010, said Matthew Benson, a spokesman for Brewer.

\$50 Million Goal

For the border fence, more than \$146,000 has been collected from about 3,000 private donors in 50 states since fundraising began July 20. At least 568 were from Arizona, 329 from California, 182 from Texas, 173 from Florida, 88 from New York and 42 from New Jersey. The goal is to raise a minimum of \$50 million, said Smith.

Smith acknowledged that the fund will have to collect several million dollars to do anything. Existing fencing on the U.S.-Mexico border cost an average of \$1 million to almost \$4 million a mile (1.6 kilometers) to build, with some areas costing as much as \$15 million per mile, according to a 2009 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office. The state would use inmate labor to keep costs down. Smith said.

The law doesn't specify where or how the fence would be built. The 16-member Joint Border Security Advisory Committee, which includes Smith and nationally known border-hawk Sheriffs Joe Arpaio and Paul Babeu, would control the money and the project.

The 368-mile-long border between Mexico and Arizona now has 306 miles of fencing built by the federal government -- 123.2 miles of pedestrian fencing and 182.8 miles of vehicle fencing, said Victor L. Brabble, a U.S. Customs and Border Protection spokesman in Arizona. About 61 miles don't have fencing because of mountains or other difficult terrain, he said.

'Unparalleled Invasion'

The Arizona campaign site features a photo of a fence across the open desert that is intended to block vehicles -- vertical poles placed too close to one another for a car to drive through -- with the question, "Does this look like a secure border?"

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Published on Immigration Policy Center (http://www.immigrationpolicy.org)

In a letter posted to the site, Smith said donors' help is needed to stop "an unparalleled invasion." He cites statistics on deaths in Mexico and an estimate by the anti-immigration group FAIR (Federation for American Immigration Reform) that illegal immigrants cost the nation \$100 billion per year, a figure opponent groups say is inflated.

He also notes that the total number of non-Mexican immigrants detained (45,279 in 2009) includes those from Middle Eastern countries and quotes FBI testimony that immigrants from Islamic nations might change their names and learn to speak Spanish to pretend to be Hispanic.

'Racial Profiling'

Walter Ewing, a researcher at the Washington-based Immigration Policy Center, which supports comprehensive changes to U.S. law, said in an e-mail that the letter from Smith on the fence project's website is "replete with errors and misleading statements" including claims about Middle Eastern immigrants that are akin to "racial profiling."

Former Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard, a Democrat who lost to Brewer in the governor's race last year and now is a senior fellow with the Immigration Policy Center, said the fence would be expensive to build and won't work. All types of fencing can be penetrated, dug under, climbed or flown over by the criminal syndicates responsible for smuggling drugs and most immigrants, he said.

"I think it is a fraud," he said in a telephone interview. "I think it is taking people's money with the assertion it will do something to stop the smuggling of human beings and drugs," Goddard said. "This is money taken under false pretenses. It won't."

Published in the Bloomberg

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