

# Lawmaker on Long Island Wants Worker Status Verified

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By COREY KILGANNON

HAUPPAUGE, N.Y. — In the latest move on eastern Long Island to crack down on illegal immigrants, a freshman Suffolk County legislator proposed a bill on Thursday that would require the estimated 15,000 licensed contractors there to verify their workers' legal status.

The legislator, Brian Beedenbender, said the legislation, which would be the first of its kind in the state, would “level the playing field for businesses” that already hire only legal workers.

Mr. Beedenbender, a Democratic protégé of County Executive Steve Levy, who has crusaded against illegal immigration, said at a news conference here that the bill was meant to “stand up for people who follow the rules” by hiring legal workers and not meant to affect Hispanic immigrants adversely.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “the debate has to be steered in that direction” by Hispanic advocates.

Several advocates quickly criticized the legislation as a wrongheaded attempt to address the issue of unauthorized workers, and said that such a move would virtually deputize local contractors to do the verification work of immigration agents.

An advocate who showed up uninvited at the news conference, the Rev. Allan Ramirez of the Brookville Reformed Church, who is a longtime critic of Mr. Levy's policies, accused Mr. Beedenbender of “stirring the pot and playing to a segment of the community that has been anti-immigrant for a long time.”

Mr. Ramirez said of Mr. Beedenbender, “I would suggest that you're either racist or dumb.” Mr. Ramirez held a Bible and wore bluejeans and a black shirt with a preacher's collar.

This prompted hoots of protest from union leaders standing with Mr. Beedenbender, and a denial from Mr. Beedenbender, who said he was neither biased nor pandering to voters opposed to giving jobs to illegal immigrants.

“I'm very disappointed with what he said, and I won't go back and forth with name calling,” Mr. Beedenbender said.

Under Mr. Beedenbender's proposal, the county's estimated 15,000 contractors — including electricians, plumbers, home contractors, roofers and asphalt pavers — would be required to verify employees' legal working status. Violators would face punishment ranging from losing their licenses to being fined or jailed up to four years. Currently, Suffolk County gets 100 to 200 license applications a month and renews about 500.

Several public hearings will be held before the proposal is voted on by the County Legislature.

A spokesman for Mr. Levy said in an e-mail message that "if the bill gets to the county executive's desk, he will sign it." Mr. Levy did not attend the news conference.

In 2006, the county approved legislation supported by Mr. Levy requiring contractors who do business with the county to prove that their employees had legal immigration status. While many contractors have been audited by the county, officials say, only one company has been found to be in violation.

The announcement was the latest proposal raised in a county where working-class residents and resort areas are dependent on cheap immigrant laborers for services ranging from landscaping to restaurant work.

Mr. Beedenbender, 27, was an aide to Mr. Levy for more than three years, and the county executive used his considerable popularity and political clout to help Mr. Beedenbender win his seat last year on a platform heavy on immigration reform.

For his part, Mr. Levy says the proliferation of illegal immigrants is threatening the quality of life in the county by driving up costs for schools, hospitals and jails.

In an effort to limit the influx of illegal immigrants, which Mr. Levy placed at 40,000, he successfully sought to have federal immigration officials assigned to the county jail to check prisoners' status, and police officers were given access to federal databases to check the immigration status of arrestees.

Last year, his legislation intended to discourage day laborers seeking work from standing by the side of the road was rejected by the County Legislature after a public outcry.

Mr. Levy, who has helped head national immigration reform groups, says that the federal government has failed to address the problems of illegal immigration or to stem the flow of illegal immigrants, and that local governments must take up the slack.

The measure proposed on Thursday does not directly mention illegal immigrants, but it refers repeatedly to Title 8 in the federal code, which deems it illegal to "hire, or to recruit or refer for a fee, for employment in the United States an alien knowing the alien is an unauthorized alien."

Mr. Ramirez accused Mr. Beedenbender of doing Mr. Levy's bidding by making the proposed bill his first piece of legislation since being sworn in a month ago.

"They should be bringing us together," he said, "but instead, they're race-baiting and throwing red meat to their constituents to score political points."

Two fellow Democrats, Ricardo Montano and Vivian Vilorio-Fisher, who have taken issue with Mr. Levy's immigration initiatives, have criticized Mr. Beedenbender's proposal.

A Republican, Ed Romaine, who has generally supported Mr. Levy's immigration initiatives, said he had concerns with the proposal.

"It could be local government overstepping its boundaries because it's not the county's purview to resolve national immigration policy," Mr. Romaine said.

As he put it: "The contractor's license becomes a litmus test because instead of just measuring competency, it adds on a social policy, and the applicant has to agree or they don't get the license. It's like the county saying, 'We won't give a homeowner a deed unless they promise never to have an illegal immigrant clean the yard.' "