Immigrants Are Subject of Tough Bill in Georgia

By **KIM SEVERSON**

ATLANTA — With Gov. Nathan Deal's acknowledgment that he would sign a tough immigration law, Georgia was thrust on Friday into the center of the national fight over how much control states have in curbing illegal immigration.

The State Legislature this week passed a bill that puts Georgia in a league with Arizona, the first state to empower the local and state police to demand documentation of residency and to detain people they reasonably suspect are in the country illegally.

On Monday, the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld a trial judge's ruling blocking the most contentious parts of Arizona's law, which raised hope among Georgia residents fighting the bill. But the bill went back and forth between chambers until it was passed in the final hours of Georgia's legislative session Thursday.

Lawmakers modified the Georgia bill slightly from Arizona's and softened requirements surrounding use of the federal E-Verify program, which helps employers confirm online whether potential employees can legally work in the United States.

That helped appease at least some of the state's powerful agricultural and business interests, which had lobbied against the bill, and gave Mr. Deal, a Republican who had been noticeably silent on the issue, enough confidence to throw his support behind the measure. He has 40 days to sign the bill but is expected to do so much sooner.

"At the end of the day, rural legislators voted for this bill," said Brian Robinson, the governor's spokesman. "Those legislators most attuned to agriculture and agribusiness came on board."

The bill helps the governor fulfill a campaign promise and sends a message to Washington, Mr. Robinson said: "States are picking up the tab for the gigantic cost of a problem that Washington won't fix."

Groups that fought the bill with more than a dozen public rallies and weeks of lobbying, as well as threats of recall and economic disruption, began discussing a national boycott in anticipation of the governor's signature.

"We have a whole tourism industry in Atlanta that is just people visiting civil rights sites," said Xochitl Bervera, a spokeswoman for Somos Georgia, an immigrant rights

group that is working on strategy with Turning the Tide, a national group that organized a boycott in Arizona that has cost that state more than $100 million in lost hospitality revenue, according to some estimates.

"This is going to really damage folks who want to do business with the state," she said of the Georgia bill. "It's embarrassing, honestly."

Because much of the debate centered on people from Mexico and Latin American countries, some Hispanics in the state said the bill would open the door to more harassment and discrimination.

"The targeting of people of color is already happening," said Azadeh Shahshahani of the Georgia chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Georgina Perez, 21, of Marietta, came to Georgia from Mexico City when she was 3 and is not in the country legally. The legislation has prompted her to speak publicly about her status as a way to bring attention to the issue.

"The politicians forget that we are human beings," she said in a telephone interview. "We have our houses here in Georgia. We went to school here. We have families here. For them to criminalize us was disgusting."

The Georgia bill also requires the state Agriculture Department to study creating a guest worker program. Utah, the only other state to pass a law aimed at curbing the population of illegal immigrants, designed a guest worker program aimed at helping businesses keep workers. But it does not supersede federal immigration law.

In all, 30 states have considered anti-immigration legislation, most of which are styled after Arizona's. Many measures died in the legislative sessions. Similar bills have passed at least one chamber of state legislatures in Alabama, Indiana, Oklahoma and South Carolina and remain in committee in several others.