

Should Perry be thankful for unanswered prayer?

By LISA FALKENBERG

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Our governor is very focused on prayer these days. He's praying for rain. Praying for our culture. Praying for people to join him at a big spiritual shindig at Reliant in August.

But in an email the other day, a Republican compatriot suggested the governor learn to appreciate another kind of prayer: the unanswered kind.

"Governor, Garth Brooks has a hit that includes the words 'Thank God for unanswered prayers!'" longtime GOP activist Norman Adams wrote. "When it comes to the Sanctuary City bill, we believe you should thank God for the opposition from our police chiefs and sheriffs across the state. Its failure to pass was a blessing for you and for Texas Republicans."

Adams' email apparently didn't have much effect. The so-called sanctuary city bill that died last session is alive and kicking again after Gov. Rick Perry this week added it to the list of issues that can be considered in the current special session.

Adams is part of a vocal group of conservative Republicans, including Dr. Steve Hotze, who, along with many Democrats, support immigration reform and securing our borders, but not Arizona-style legislation intent on dictating to local governments how they should enforce federal law.

What about recruitment?

Hotze's motives for opposing the legislation might be just as political as Perry's for supporting it: "It seems that we should focus on recruiting Hispanics to the Republican ranks," Hotze wrote the governor's office on behalf of the Conservative Republicans of Texas PAC. "It appears that this bill might accomplish just the opposite."

Adams, however, makes several valid arguments, namely that the legislation simply isn't needed: "I don't think there's a good argument for it, other than the fact that the governor wants it. That's the only reason I can find."

The resurrected version of state Sen. Tommy Williams' bill is much better than some of the earlier versions promoted last session. We'll call this one Arizona Light.

It requires every person arrested in Texas to be run through the federal Secure Communities Program, which automatically notifies immigration officials when someone fingerprinted at a jail or prison has an immigration record.

'Money and time'

Many Texas jurisdictions have already chosen to take part in the program, but not all.

Webster, a city of about 11,000, is one that does not.

"That's going to cost us money and time that we don't have," Police Chief Ray Smiley told me Thursday. "The state's telling me I have to do it. And I think that needs to be left up to the municipalities."

Of course, the real target of the legislation — Houston — which the governor gleefully dubbed a sanctuary city in his campaign against former Houston Mayor Bill White, already uses Secure Communities.

What Houston officers don't do is ask about immigration status in the field. This policy not only keeps officers focused on their real jobs, fighting crime, but it helps ensure a cooperative relationship with immigrant communities, members of which are vital in reporting crimes and identifying suspects.

The legislation would ban Houston from banning officers from asking about immigration status of a person arrested or "lawfully detained for the investigation of a criminal offense."

That's not such a big deal, you might think. And you might be right, if every law enforcement officer was an honest, upstanding, reasonable individual with no petty, prejudiced or racist bone in his or her body. But this provision opens departments to profiling and lawsuits. And for what?

Public safety

Motivations for pushing these new immigration provisions really aren't about better immigration enforcement. Or even, as Perry's chief of staff claims, about saving the lives of police officers and others who have fallen victim to the tiny minority of illegal immigrants who commit crimes.

"Our concern is for the safety of Texas neighborhoods and law enforcement officials," Ray Sullivan said in an email to Hotze. "One cannot help but be moved by the stories of HPD officers who have died in the line of duty at the hands of those who should not be on Texas streets, all while local policies prohibit them from doing their jobs."

Sullivan included a Chronicle article on the reported street gang member and illegal immigrant from Mexico, Johoan Rodriguez, who is charged in the death of Houston police officer Kevin Will two weekends ago while allegedly driving drunk.

Will's death was tragic, especially for his young family. But sanctuary city legislation wouldn't have done much to prevent it. Rodriguez already had been deported twice before.

This bill may not be as harmful as Arizona's legislation. But if it passes, the perception of what it aims to do will erode trust between immigrant communities and law enforcement.

The governor may think that perception is good for politics, and that's debatable. But there's no doubt it's bad for public safety.