

## **Immigration divide may stall session**

### **Despite budget shortfall, the real battle in Austin likely will be over Arizona-style bill**

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AUSTIN — When Texas House Speaker Joe Straus recently invited a group of Gillespie County Republicans to ask him anything, the most passionate questions did not focus on a looming \$18 billion budget shortfall or worries over public education, water or high insurance rates.

Instead, fired-up "patriots" want action on an Arizona-style get-tough immigration law in Texas.

Some worry that a push from a vociferous segment of the GOP for the hot-button issue will ensure a toxic legislative session at a time lawmakers already face daunting challenges maintaining crucial state services.

Many Republican members, however, say they have no choice. Immigration may be a federal responsibility, but growing concerns about illegal immigration make it a line-in-the-sand issue for GOP voters.

"It is just so frustrating for those of us who were born here and for those who have come through the system and are upholding their end of the deal," said Fredericksburg businesswoman Angela Smith, who also is a leader of the Patriots of Gillespie County. "Those who would laugh it off or say that this is a far-right idea are not in the mainstream."

Reps. Leo Berman, R-Tyler, and Debbie Riddle, R-Tomball, already have declared intentions to pass an Arizona-type immigration bill into law after the legislative session opens in January.

"I respectfully cautioned House leadership that it would make the voter ID debacle look like child's play," said Rep. Rene Oliveira of Brownsville, referring to the 2009 session when Democratic efforts to stop legislation on voter identification paralyzed the legislative process. "It will be really, really serious. Just as some right-wing Republicans are passionate about this, you will see Hispanics and many Democrats being just as passionate in their resistance."

Many Democrats and minority lawmakers take exception to what they consider a harsh over-reaction to the immigration problem. They view the Arizona law as unfair to Latinos because of the risk that people will be targeted, turning enforcement into a discrimination tool.

#### **Added duty for officers**

The Arizona law requires law enforcement officers to check a person's immigration status - while enforcing other laws - if they have a "reasonable suspicion" that the person they have stopped is in the country illegally.

Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, chairman of the Senate Business and Commerce Committee, said he expects a "huge push" for immigration reform. "If the Legislature were to choose an Arizona-style path to go down, then I do believe that the emotions will run very high," he said.

It is important, he said, that lawmakers have public hearings and review the issue before deciding a course.

"We need to be very cautious. We need to be mindful of all of the concerns among the public. But, above all, we would be mistaken as a legislative body were we to choose to ignore the issue entirely in favor of other issues," he said. "The voting public here in Texas has made it clear that immigration is one of its top concerns, and, as such, I think legislators of both parties are obligated and have a responsibility to address the issue."

Straus spokeswoman Tracy Young said, "Speaker Straus agrees with Gov. (Rick) Perry that the heart of the issue is the immediate need to focus on border security and the safety of Texans, and that the federal government should do its job."

Legislators next year will face severe budget problems, divisive redistricting, school funding troubles and reviews of major state agencies, including the Texas Commission of Environmental Quality and the Texas Department of Insurance.

"We are going to have a very tough session," said Rep. Burt Solomons, R-Carrollton, chairman of the State Affairs Committee.

But addressing those over-arching issues will not be enough to satisfy Republican voters, he said: "They want us to deal with these other issues. It's a line in the sand."

"Voter ID and immigration issues are right up there at the top. And nullification (of the national health care law) is a big issue," Solomons said. "The Republican voters are wanting some things done if Washington isn't going to do it. And they want states to start taking action."

Federal court rulings in the Arizona immigration dispute are expected to influence debate in the Texas Capitol. Another factor could be who wins the governor's race.

### **'Solving the real issues'**

The head of the Mexican American Legislative Caucus said his 10 years in the Texas Legislature have taught him neither party can govern from the extreme.

"Leaders from both parties need to put their party hats and their partisanship issues aside and let's figure out how we are going to get down to solving the real issues that the voters sent us there to deal with," said Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer, D-San Antonio, chairman of the 44-member caucus.

It is not a coincidence, he said, that Texas has the highest insurance rates in the country while the Department of Insurance has escaped legislative scrutiny.

"There's a correlation there that leads to bad policy," Martinez Fischer said. "Legislative redistricting will be about as much partisan politics that we are going to want. Focus and

concentrate our efforts on those issues and let the Tea Party and all the other side shows continue to have their side shows. But we shouldn't allow them to perform in the Texas Capitol and on the floor of the House."