

Political heavyweights line up behind undocumented immigrant driving bill

BY DAVE MCKINNEY

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SPRINGFIELD — Virtually every big-name politician in Illinois, with the exception of the two Republican legislative leaders, will gather Tuesday to support an upcoming push to license as many as 250,000 undocumented immigrants to drive in Illinois.

In a nearly unprecedented show of support, Gov. Pat Quinn, Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Senate President John Cullerton (D-Chicago), former GOP Gov. Jim Edgar, GOP state comptroller Judy Baar Topinka, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle and state Rep. Edward Acevedo (D-Chicago) plan to sign on to the immigrant-rights driving initiative and attend Tuesday's news conference in support of it.

The event, sponsored by the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, aims to highlight legislation in the works that would equip undocumented immigrants with three-year temporary driver's licenses, said Lawrence Benito, chief executive officer and executive director for the group.

The proposal that likely will be voted on sometime during the post-election legislative session that spans from later this month through early January will be a variation from 2007 legislation for undocumented immigrant drivers that narrowly passed the House but failed to get called for a vote in the Senate, he said.

"I don't think it's going to be as hard a sell [as 2007], but we're belts-and-suspenders people. We'll work until it gets signed into law," said Benito said. "I do think there will be strong bipartisan support for it based on who's showing up [Tuesday]."

The legislation now being drafted in the Senate would create a narrower window of time under which undocumented immigrants would be licensed — three years instead of five — and require that they carry auto insurance and have driver's education before being licensed, a Cullerton spokesman said.

"From the Senate president's point of view, you have 250,000 on the roads in Illinois who are uninsured and undocumented, which means they've taken no formal kind of drivers' training," Cullerton spokesman Ron Holmes said. "If they're going to be driving, we're trying to make sure they're insured and have gone through the proper methods to be trained on the roads."

Cullerton's office said that the 250,000 undocumented immigrants in Illinois contribute toward \$660 million in insurance claim costs and that 42 percent of all fatal crashes in the state involve unlicensed drivers.

Washington state and New Mexico now require undocumented immigrants to get driver's licenses.

The 2007 proposal involved creating a five-year driver's certificate for motorists 18 and over who were in the country illegally. It required a passport, a valid tax identification number, proof of insurance and the submission of fingerprints, among other things.

While that plan narrowly passed the House on a 60-58 roll call, it never was called for a vote in the Senate and died amid opposition from Republicans and some suburban Democrats.

Benito said the growing clout that Latino voters possess should help muster support for the initiative this time and give Republicans a second chance to show "good faith" with the influential voting bloc that swung heavily Democratic earlier this month.

Not on Tuesday's lineup of political attendees is House Minority Leader Tom Cross (R-Oswego) and Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno (R-Lemont).

"This is the closest thing that Springfield sees to the immigration debate. If the Republican Party wants to show good faith in doing outreach to the Latino and immigrant community, this is a bill that would show good faith, that they weren't Johnny-come-latelys."

A Cross spokeswoman said she was not certain what Cross' posture on the legislation would be and noted that the House Republican caucus has not yet met to discuss the initiative.

"Basically, I know Tom and a representative of the group had planned to sit down, but it hasn't happened as of yet. Tom wants to sit down and learn more about it," Cross spokeswoman Vicki Crawford said. "Tom doesn't even know what's in the bill."

A spokeswoman for Radogno could not be reached.

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/metro/16503963-418/political-heavyweights-line-up-behind-undocumented-immigrant-driving-bill.html>