

THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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June 14, 2010

Immigration riles Republicans

Watching red-faced, shouting Republicans wrangle over the immigration platform at their state convention in Dallas over the weekend -- immigrants or aliens? let them join the military or not? -- I got to thinking about two mealtime meetings I attended recently that underscored the depth of feeling about this thorny, complicated issue. A version of this story ran in an early edition of the Chron yesterday but then disappeared:

On a weekday evening in far north Houston, state Rep. Debbie Riddle, R-Tomball, is table-hopping at Ranchero King Buffet, prior to speaking to the monthly meeting of the Republican National Hispanic Assembly of Harris County. As the slender blonde-haired legislator visits with her fellow Republicans, a video tape featuring Ronald Reagan's greatest speeches competes with chants filtering in from outside. Sign-carrying demonstrators alongside IH-45 are protesting Riddle's intention to bring an Arizona-style immigration law to Texas. Truck drivers heading out of Houston blast their air-horns, presumably in support.

Riddle, whose previous claim to legislative fame was the insertion of "under God" into the Texas Pledge of Allegiance, is magnanimous toward her critics. "Here in America, unlike other countries, people have the freedom to express their opinion, and I applaud that," she says. "They're wrong, but I applaud what they're doing. This is about border security, and why anyone would oppose border security, I don't know."

A horse breeder elected to represent the 150th District in 2002, Riddle said she's a bit miffed that no one paid attention two years ago when she filed House Bill 49, a Texas version of the Arizona law before there was an Arizona law. They're paying attention now.

"This is the topic," said Laura Murillo, president of the Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce as she hosted the chamber's regular breakfast gathering at the Westin Galleria on the same day Riddle was speaking. "It was health care; now it's immigration reform. This is critically important, and as a business organization we believe it has great impact on the success or failure of our city."

With that, Riddle would agree. "The number-one priority for every elected official is to make sure that the safety and security of Texans is well-established," she told the Hispanic Republican group, "and if we don't do that, and if we don't do that well, there is no number-two priority."

Riddle and Murillo also agree that the Arizona approach that Riddle wants to bring to Texas is an expression of frustration with the federal government's failure to address the complicated immigration issue. They disagree, of course, on how the issue needs to be resolved.

"I would encourage her [Riddle] to listen to other people," Murillo said, "to make sure she has all the facts and information before she tries to bring something of that nature to Texas. Fortunately, our chamber believes that there are a great many people in this city and this state who understand that something along the lines that she's talking about just is not reality."

Riddle, who says she's still fine-tuning her bill, says she has assembled a group of advisers to assess the legislation. "And by the way, they're all Hispanic," she told the Hispanic Republican group.

She downplays concerns about racial profiling, civil liberties violations or diverting cops from more urgent crime-fighting concerns. "It will give law-enforcement officers a tool, a tool in their tool kit," she said.

She also brushed aside comments from Houston Police Chief Charles McClelland, one of nine chiefs who met with Attorney General Eric Holder to voice concern about local police enforcement of immigration laws. "I don't think he's putting the safety and security of the people he's protecting first," she said. "And if you look and see the ones that went, I think they're all Democrats."

The bill Riddle filed last session would have created a new criminal violation - criminal trespass by illegal aliens - and would have allowed state and local law enforcement officers to arrest those who are in the country illegally. She has said that she will introduce the same measure during the pre-filing period in November that precedes the January legislative session.

An Arizona-type law, she said, would help law enforcement deal with drug cartels, gang violence, human trafficking and other serious crimes.

Unlike the Arizona law, she told Hispanic Republicans last week, her bill will require law enforcement people to confirm the immigration status of a suspect with U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement before making an arrest and does not require the suspect to produce identification. An officer would have to have reasonable suspicion that the person was in the country illegally before making the inquiry, she said.

"First of all, racial profiling is illegal," she said. "House Bill 49 does not allow anyone to be detained without reasonable suspicion, and the color of a person's skin is not a factor in any way in meeting that requirement. . . . That does not mean going down the street with a tail light on. That does not mean driving down the street doing nothing. That does not mean walking down the sidewalk taking your kids to go get ice cream."

Although most who heard Riddle's comments at El Rancho Buffet supported her, a few expressed skepticism.

"What if I get stopped and the cops just want to mess with me, because they can abuse their power by saying I didn't want to present an ID or what have you?" asked Cynthia Callahan, a legal secretary. "I'm a third-generation American, but they still could mess with me if they wanted to."

That's a possibility, Riddle conceded. "But there's nothing to prevent that law-enforcement officer from abusing any law. And there's other laws that could be scarier than that. But the likelihood is they won't. . . . But if a law-enforcement officer does that, there are penalties, because he is breaking the law."

"It's almost totally irrelevant to the national debate," said local attorney Charles Foster, who advised President George W. Bush on immigration reform. "Where will it contribute to solving this issue? Maybe, someday, some undocumented illegals will wake up and say, we'd rather live in New Mexico or California or Kansas. You may have some net outflow from Arizona. . . but it won't do anything toward solving the problem."

For the past three years, Foster has headed a Greater Houston Partnership task force working on immigration reform. The group endorses what Foster calls comprehensive immigration reform, a middle ground between blanket amnesty and mass deportation.

Comprehensive immigration reform, as Foster defines it, relies, first of all, on enhanced border security. The second component involves identifying every undocumented worker, requires criminal background checks and mandates that all employees, including citizens, have a tamper-proof identification card that works with E-Verify. The Schumer-Graham bill is mired in off-year election politics.

"That's a very conservative bill," said Stan Marek, a specialty subcontractor who serves on the Partnership task force and who addressed the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce breakfast. "Even people with Border Watch can support that."

Immigration reform legislation - sponsored initially by Sens. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y. and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. - is mired in off-year election politics.

Marek, who describes himself as a Republican, says both parties are playing politics with the volatile issue. If Republicans don't go to the table and support the Schumer outline," he said, "they think the Latino vote will be angry with the Democrats and vote Republican in the November elections. The Democrats, on the other hand - Obama -

keeps feeding just enough out there to try to keep the Latinos engaged with the Democratic Party. I personally think it could backfire on both of them."

Foster, who said he met with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said Graham has withdrawn his support of the bill, in part because he's concerned about the political prospects of Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who's facing a tough primary fight against an opponent who's an immigration hard-liner. "He did not want his good buddy McCain to have to vote on this before the August primary," he said. Foster theorized that Graham might get back on board after McCain either prevails in the primary or doesn't.

"Obama really doesn't think he has the votes in the Senate to do it," Marek said, "but if Reid were to bring it forward in the Senate - maybe he waits until after McCain's election - and the Republicans kill it, they can think that would help them at the polls. That could happen."

Beto Cardenas, who serves as executive counsel for Americans for Immigration Reform, says that August is probably too late for anything to happen, since Congress will be focused on November and bipartisan cooperation on immigration reform is in no one's short-term political interest.