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Illinois legislative roundup

By Times staff report

Vote on licenses for illegal aliens today

The Senate votes again today on a measure that would allow illegal aliens to obtain driver's licenses. It failed by a single vote in the first week of the veto session, but was kept alive by sponsor Sen. Miguel del Valle, D-Chicago, in a procedural maneuver.

There was heavy lobbying Tuesday both for and against Senate Bill 67.

Margaret Blackshere, president of the Illinois AFL-CIO, circulated a letter among lawmakers that said its passage "means a dramatically greater number of drivers on our roads will be trained, licensed and insured."

Along with Blackshere, a raft of the state's top union leadership signed the letter. Included were Tom Balanoff of the Service Employees International Union Illinois; Henry Bayer of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 31; Dennis Gannon of the Chicago Federation of Labor and Eddie Smith of Laborer's International Union Midwest Region.

A dueling press conference was held by a Connecticut-based organization called 9/11 Families for a Secure America, or FSA. FSA's Peter Gadiel, whose son, James, died in the World Trade Center attack, called driver's licenses a "terrorist tool." He said del Valle and others supporting SB 67 were showing "contempt" for victims of the attacks and their families.

Gadiel also said President Bush is the "most despised man in America" among the families of 9/11 victims. He chided the president for opposing an independent investigation of the attacks and said Bush has done nothing to "control the borders" against terrorists.

Gadiel said his organization had several hundred members, but acknowledged under questioning that it had no membership roll, charged no dues, and had no annual budget and no bank account.

In May, Gadiel was featured in a Maryland radio ad opposing a similar legislative effort there. At the time, Joseph F. Vallario Jr., chairman of that state's House Judiciary Committee, called the radio ad "grossly misleading."

The ad was paid for by the Federation for American Immigration Reform, or FAIR, a Washington-based group deeply involved in the anti-immigration movement.

In covering the controversy, the Baltimore Sun quoted an attorney with the Maryland Coalition for Justice as claiming FSA and FAIR had jumped into the driver's license issue "because as much as possible they want to manipulate the discussion around immigration."

"They are opportunists," Kimberley A. Propeack said. "What they are really trying to do is get this message out that immigrants are terrorists, immigrants caused 9/11."

Gadiel was joined in the press session by Sen. Chris Lauzen, R-Aurora, a vocal opponent of SB 67.

— Times Springfield Bureau

ATVs run out of gas in Illinois House

The House postponed an override vote Tuesday on Gov. Rod Blagojevich's amendatory veto of SB 1521. The measure originally would have allowed money in the Department of Natural Resource, or DNR's Off-Highway Vehicle Trails Fund to be used for construction of all-terrain vehicle (ATV) trails in state parks.

In amending the bill, the governor restored language prohibiting the funds from being used to build ATV trails on currently owned DNR land, but added wording that permitted trail construction in new parks.

"The governor wants to protect existing state parks from the damage done by off-road vehicles," press aide Abby Ottenhoff said.

After realizing they did not have the 70 votes necessary to reject the governor's changes, the bill's sponsors kept it alive by parking it in the Rules Committee. It could surface again before the session ends. If lawmakers fail to vote on it, or if they fail in an override, then the original legislation dies along with the governor's changes.

Among its co-sponsors in the Senate are Republicans Dale Righter of Mattoon, and John O. Jones of Mount Vernon. House co-sponsors include Democrats Brandon Phelps of Norris City and Effingham's Bill Grunloh.

Former Reps. Gary Forby, D-Benton, now a state senator, and Chuck Hartke, D-Teutopolis, now director of the state Department of Agriculture, also co-sponsored the measure in the House.

Tax watchdogs say pension plans severely under-funded

Illinois Tax Facts, the monthly publication of the Taxpayers' Federation of Illinois, is reporting that as of June 30, 2002, the five Illinois state pension funds had combined assets of \$40.3 billion but a combined liability of \$75.2 billion.

The unfunded liability of \$34.9 billion, according to Illinois Tax Facts, was "by far the largest in absolute dollars" in the nation.

The state has five different pension funds. The State Employees Retirement System covers employees in most of the state agencies. The Teachers Retirement System covers public school teachers and administrators statewide, except in the city of Chicago. The State Universities Retirement System covers staff and faculty at public colleges and universities, as well as employees of state research institutions.

Two additional pension funds are earmarked for judges and members of the General Assembly.

Kevin Ahlgrim, an assistant professor at Illinois State University, and University of Illinois professor Stephen P. D'Arcy, examined the funds. In calculating the ratio of each fund's assets divided by its liabilities, Ahlgrim and D'Arcy noted that three of the funds included in the study ranked in the bottom six nationally.

On the Web: www.taxpayfedil.org.

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