

Maine lawmakers reject Real ID

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Maine lawmakers voted yesterday to reject proposed federal standards for driver's licenses, calling on the U.S. Congress to repeal the Real ID Act which imposes them, and setting the stage for a battle of wills on Capitol Hill.



The resolution, passed unanimously by the state Senate and 137-4 in the House, does not have the force of law, but its authors say that they plan to pass legislation later in the session. They also say Maine will be just the first of many states to oppose the law, which takes effect next year.

"This will be model legislation for the country," said Maine state Rep. Scott Lansley, a Republican.

He said his bill, which would reach the floor "within a month or so," will prohibit the state government from spending money to implement Real ID.

The American Civil Liberties Union said similar initiatives are under way in 11 other states: Georgia, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Vermont, Washington and Wyoming.

"Mainers ... alarmed by the threat posed to privacy and identity-security" by Real ID, were "leading a nationwide movement," said Shenna Bellows of the Maine Civil Liberties Union, adding that lawmakers also saw it as "a hugely expensive unfunded mandate."

State House Majority Leader Hannah Pingree, a Democrat, said that the changes the act imposed would cost Maine \$185 million over five years, and that because the rule-making process has lagged "even if we wanted to, we don't know how we would comply" with the law's requirements by the 2008 deadline.

"We hope the federal government will listen and repeal the act," she said.

But if they do not, she added, the state would end up playing "somewhat of a game of chicken."

The Real ID Act, tacked on by Republican congressional leaders to a must-pass funding bill in 2005, mandates minimum security standards for driver's licenses, but also creates a single, interoperative database of state motor vehicle records that opponents have likened to a national ID card system.

"It will be a one-stop shop for identity thieves," said Miss Bellows, adding that a requirement for machine-readable capability for new licenses would potentially enable government databases to track license holders as they moved around.

Opponents also have said that requirements for license holders to prove their identity using a short list of acceptable documents will be burdensome on the elderly and economically marginal, and that depriving illegal aliens of the right to hold a license might be a disaster for road safety.

Despite the opposition, under the law as it stands, driver's licenses issued by states that do not meet the Real ID requirements in 2008 will no longer be valid for "federal purposes" -- such as boarding planes or entering U.S. government buildings.

Supporters of the resolution are quite clear about the potential consequences of the move, Miss Bellows said.

"It is a contest of wills," she said. "The federal government needs to hear from the states."