

ARIZONA SOFTENS TONE ON ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

By Miriam Jordan
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Once the leader among states in cracking down on illegal immigration, Arizona is showing signs of tempering its approach to the contentious issue.

Business, civic and religious leaders last month unveiled a statement of principles, dubbed the "Arizona Accord," that calls for a new strategy. It notes the economic contribution of immigrants, espouses federal rather than state solutions, opposes policies that result in the separation of families and embraces a culture of inclusion.

So far, signatories on the business side include the Greater Phoenix Economic Council, the Arizona Farm Bureau and top executives of large construction firms and agriculture concerns, among others.

Business lobbying already played a role in the defeat last year of further measures to curb illegal immigration advanced by state lawmakers. In 2010, Arizona lawmakers passed a law that made it a crime to be undocumented and required police to question people about their immigration status. Key components of that law have been put on hold by a federal court, and it will be reviewed by the Supreme Court in April.

The Arizona law inspired legislators in other states to craft similar measures. Arizona-style bills were signed into law in Alabama and other states. But in November, voters in Mesa, a conservative suburb of Phoenix, recalled the architect of the 2010 Arizona law. Senate President Russell Pearce was ousted by Jerry Lewis, who campaigned for less-confrontational immigration policies.

Now, some Arizona lawmakers who once said state bills were necessary because the federal government was failing to secure the border are striking a different tone and suggesting the measures were counterproductive.

"In Arizona, we're no longer willing to throw illegal-immigration bills against the wall to see what sticks," said Adam Driggs, a Republican state senator who supported many measures to curb illegal immigration in the past. "Our focus is whether a law will be effective. We as a state can work with federal agencies and not be at odds with them."

In the last legislative session, five illegal-immigration proposals were defeated. In the current session, several Republican senators have co-sponsored a measure designed to soften a 2007 law that punishes employers of illegal immigrants.

Matthew Benson, a spokesman for Republican Gov. Jan Brewer, said it was "fair to say" that immigration wasn't commanding as much attention these days. "From the governor's perspective, the people of Arizona expect the governor to support both a secure border and push for an improved economy," he said.

Business leaders say tourism and conventions, one of the state's top industries, suffered cancellations after the 2010 measure was passed. "The law was Draconian and fanned anger," said Nan Walden, vice president of Farmers Investment Co., a large pecan grower and exporter who signed the Arizona Accord.

The measure also threatened her business, she said. After the bill's passage, her company appeared on a list of companies to boycott; its offices in southern Arizona were visited by people asking whether illegal immigrants worked there.

Glenn Hamer, president of the Arizona Chamber of Commerce, said that in contrast to previous years, "the word immigration did not come up" during a recent annual legislative forecast luncheon with top state elected officials. "The focus was on what the state could do to improve the economy," Mr. Hamer said.

Shortly after the new legislative session opened, Mr. Lewis and eight fellow Republican state senators introduced a bill on Jan. 30 that would provide safe-harbor protections for businesses that use a federal employment verification program to ensure they are hiring legal workers. Under existing law, employers could be criminally prosecuted for unknowingly employing undocumented immigrants even if they used the E-Verify system.

The next day, Republican state Sen. Steve Smith introduced two anti-illegal immigration bills, signaling that some lawmakers see a need for even tougher measures. One would require school districts to keep a record of students who are undocumented immigrants. The other would require that hospitals notify immigration authorities when they treat uninsured patients who can't prove legal status.

Mr. Smith says his goal is to inform voters where their tax dollars are going. "I don't have to listen to the business community and CEOs," he said, noting that business leaders comprised a small part of his constituency.

Both bills are tweaked versions of measures that the Senate rejected last year after a fiery debate that involved intense behind-the-scenes lobbying by dozens of business people, an open letter signed by 60 chief executives and testimony by the Arizona Chamber of Commerce. "The arithmetic is not more favorable for passage this year," said Mr. Hamer, the chamber's president.