

Angst rises as Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer mulls immigration bill

by Alia Beard Rau, Mary Jo Pitzl and Ginger Rough - Apr. 21, 2010 12:00 AM
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The nation's battle over immigration reform this week landed squarely on Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer's office steps. And with four days left to decide what she'll do about one of the state's most divisive issues in the midst of an election year, the pressure is mounting.

The Arizona Senate on Monday approved Senate Bill 1070, a wide-ranging illegal-immigration measure that, among other things, makes it a state crime to be in the country illegally and requires local law enforcement to determine an individual's legal status if there is reasonable suspicion that he or she is in the U.S. illegally. Brewer has until the end of the day Saturday to sign it, veto it or do nothing and allow it to become law.

While everyone awaits her decision, the stakes continue to rise.

On Tuesday, police arrested nine college students after they chained themselves to the old Capitol-building doors in protest. More than 100 bill opponents spent the day praying and rallying. Some plan to stay round-the-clock until Brewer makes a decision.

Hundreds of phone calls and e-mails are pouring in from both sides. Brewer's Republican gubernatorial opponents are pushing for support of the bill, while some city leaders are trying to find ways around it.

Brewer's plans

The governor has been mum on whether she will sign the measure. Her advisers say she worries about the impact of this action, and she generally seeks counsel from her close circle of friends and advisers when faced with significant decisions. At day's end, they say, she's not afraid to make an unpopular choice in an important matter.

"She agonizes over these things," said Doug Cole, Brewer's campaign spokesman.

Brewer spokesman Paul Senseman said she would consider legalities, residents' sentiment and the impacts on the state, law enforcement and businesses, among other things, in making her decision.

As of Monday, the Governor's Office had received 1,356 calls, e-mails and faxes in favor of SB 1070 and 11,931 against the bill.

In remarks made to Tucson television station KVOA on Tuesday, Brewer acknowledged the intense interest in the bill and said she will weigh her decision carefully.

"Everyone has an opinion on it, and everybody wants to make sure we have the very best laws in the state of Arizona," she

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said.

Brewer's staff says she is well-equipped to deal with the intense pressure and national attention, given that she already has made a multitude of unpopular decisions, including approving billions of dollars in cuts to service programs to balance the state's budget and supporting a temporary 1-cent-per-dollar sales-tax increase that goes to voters in May.

The bill's sponsor, Sen. Russell Pearce, R-Mesa, said he has no more insight than anyone else as to when Brewer will decide.

"I wish I knew," he said.

Pearce said he has had several meetings with Governor's Office staff over the past weeks to go over the bill line by line and is "confident she is comfortable with the bill." He said he also believes Arizona residents are comfortable with it, saying he has received hundreds of e-mails in support of the bill and a few against it.

Political pull

Somos Republicans, a grass-roots group working to register more Latino Republicans, sent an e-mail to Brewer on Monday, telling her that if she supports the bill, they will request that she "leave the Republican Party."

Her would-be gubernatorial challengers have become increasingly vocal about the bill.

Presumptive Democratic nominee Terry Goddard says he is against it, while GOP gubernatorial hopefuls Owen "Buz" Mills, state Treasurer Dean Martin and former Board of Regents President John Munger said

they favor it.

When Brewer spoke Saturday night at the Arizona Hispanic Chamber of Commerce's Black and White ball, chamber President Armando Contreras asked her to veto SB 1070 "in the name of fairness, humanitarianism, and for the sake of our state's future economic prosperity and its diverse and growing community."

The governor told the audience of about 1,100 people that she would do what is right for the state.

Official responses

Levi Bolton, legislative lobbyist for the Phoenix Law Enforcement Association, which represents more than 2,500 Phoenix police officers, said his group hand-delivered a letter encouraging Brewer to sign the bill.

Phoenix Vice Mayor Michael Nowakowski sent a letter to City Manager David Cavazos, suggesting that if the bill becomes law, police should request citizenship proof from everyone they stop in order to avoid charges of racial profiling.

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The bill states that an Arizona driver's license is sufficient to prove citizenship. Nowakowski argued that licenses from other states, however, may not be sufficient because some states do not require proof of citizenship to get a license, as Arizona does.

"That means that anyone who drives in the city of Phoenix and gets pulled over better have a passport or a visa," he said.

Maricopa County Supervisor Mary Rose Wilcox spoke in front of the Capitol on Tuesday. She said the bill "is literally designed to terrorize undocumented immigrants."

"It will be proved unconstitutional," Wilcox said. "Why have Arizona pay the cost of having to go through the courts?"

Pearce said he wouldn't be surprised if local politicians and police chiefs try to avoid enforcing the measure when it becomes law. That's why it includes the clause that allows any Arizonan to file a lawsuit if they don't believe the law is being followed, he said.

Rallies of protest

The nine students arrested on suspicion of disorderly conduct Tuesday were part of a small group of about a dozen mostly college-age protesters holding signs, chanting loudly and banging drums in front of the Capitol while police watched.

"It was a symbolic gesture to block out the hatred and bigotry that has emanated from the passage of this bill to keep it from entering the executive branch," said attorney Antonio Bustamante, who represented one of the students.

A few yards away, a much larger group had gathered. They took boxes containing 8 3,000 signatures to the Governor's Office. The documents asked Brewer to veto the bill.

Pastor Warren Stewart of the First Institutional Baptist Church called upon the group to pray that God "will perform a miracle" and move Brewer to veto the bill.

Jim Wallis, CEO of the Washington-based Christian social-justice group Sojourners, said this immigration fight is not just about Arizona.

"This is about the entire country," he said. "We want to be a nation of laws, but enforcement without reform is cruel. We will not comply."

Norma Price, 68, of Tucson, said growing up in Mississippi she was ashamed of how minorities were treated. Now, she's ashamed of her new home state. She joined Tuesday's protest. "When I moved here 12 years ago, I was so pleased to see the diversity," she said. "Now, we're becoming more divided."

There were no visible groups supporting the bill at the Capitol on Tuesday.

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Pearce called Tuesday's protesters "anarchists." He said he has not heard of any planned rallies in favor of the bill but said that is because supporters trust their state leaders.

"They are working jobs and raising families and expect us to do the right thing," he said.

More opposition rallies are planned.

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