

House Passes E-Verify Bill By Narrow Margin

By Cynthia Needham
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PROVIDENCE — By a margin of victory so thin it surprised those closest to it, the Rhode Island House of Representatives Tuesday night passed the “E-Verify” bill requiring private employers to electronically verify the citizenship of new hires.

The proposal, which has now passed the House for the third consecutive year, succeeded on a 38-33 vote that came after nearly two hours of debate. Supporters cheered the approval as a powerful first step toward curbing illegal immigration problems in the state.

A year ago, the same bill passed muster in the House by a much larger, 53-17 margin. The E-Verify proposal now heads to the Senate where it has died in committee in each of the past two years and is expected to face similar challenges this time.

After Tuesday’s vote, critics in the House studied paper copies of the tally, wondering if they could have garnered the few votes needed to defeat the measure.

“There were twice as many votes against it this year as last year,” said Rep. David Segal, D-Providence, who spoke out against the measure.

Rep. Charlene Lima, D-Cranston, is one of the lawmakers who changed her mind. Lima, who as speaker pro tempore is considered a member of the leadership, voted against a bill the leadership had green-lighted. Her argument: the federal E-Verify program makes too many mistakes to be relied upon.

“No one wants illegal immigrants here, I’m sure they don’t want to be here illegally but this is the United States of America, we’ve opened our arms, we’ve embraced people from all over this world. That’s the best thing about this country,” Lima said in an impassioned speech on the floor. “Let us give the United States government an opportunity this year to address this problem. Let’s come up with a procedure to address this so people can come here legally.”

The number of mistakes is negligible, sponsor Jon Brien, D-Woonsocket, said of the plan requiring private businesses to sign statements pledging that all employees are in the country legally. The floor debate also focused on the impact to the state’s ailing business community.

“This bill [is] duplicitous and burdensome on small businesses. It is placing an additional burden on the backs of people in our communities that are just trying to make a living,” said Rep. Raymond Sullivan, D-Coventry.

It’s not E-Verify that is hurting small businesses, Rep. Joseph Trillo, R-Warwick, shot back, it is the high taxes and fees they face each year.

The House vote initially stood at 37-33 with Woonsocket Democrat Lisa Baldelli-Hunt not voting. Baldelli-Hunt later asked to be recorded in the affirmative.

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More than a half-dozen states now mandate the use of E-Verify according to the National Council of State Legislators, with hundreds of businesses using the program on a voluntary basis.

Last year in Rhode Island, Governor Carcieri issued an executive order that, in part, requires state agencies and vendors to use the same database to run similar checks.