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A new deal for migrants?

1 message

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STAFF WRITER

The governor's immigration advisory panel this week is expected to consider recommendations that the state allow undocumented immigrants to drive with a special "driver privilege card" and to attend college at in-state tuition rates, two Hispanic leaders say.

The recommendations are among several from subcommittees of Governor Corzine's Blue Ribbon Panel on Immigrant Policy, which will meet Tuesday in New Brunswick. The Hispanic leaders, who are not panel members, said that New Jersey Public Advocate Ron Chen told them at a meeting last month that the recommendations would be included in the panel's report to Corzine.

The "driving privilege card" would allow undocumented immigrants, who are forbidden from obtaining driving licenses in New Jersey, to drive legally. But it would not have the same identification function of a standard driver's license. Many undocumented immigrant students forgo higher education, which often requires them to pay higher, out-of-state tuition.

"Those are the big issues, as far as many leaders of ethnic communities are concerned," said Daniel Santo-Pietro, executive director of the Hispanic Directors Association in New Brunswick, an umbrella group. Santo-Pietro says he has been in regular contact with Chen's staff and with panel members. Laureana Organ of Montvale, who attended the meeting with Chen as a representative of the Dominican American Council, confirmed Santo-Pietro's account of the meeting.

A spokeswoman for Chen would not say whether the items would be among the recommendations.

The spokeswoman, Laurie Brewer, said that the panel on Tuesday will consider a draft, which she described as voluminous, of its report on integrating both legal and illegal immigrants into the state's economy and civic life. She said that the panel will submit its report and recommendations to the governor by month's end. Issues such as the driver's card and in-state tuition, she said, would likely need legislative approval if they end up among the recommendations.

For their part, those who favor strict immigration policies vow to fight any efforts to grant driving privileges and in-state tuition to illegal immigrants.

"There'll be a real firestorm of anger among the citizens of New Jersey if the governor tries to get driver cards or in-state tuition passed by the Legislature," said Gayle Kesselman of Carlstadt, the co-chairwoman of New Jersey Citizens for Immigration Control. "In this economy, they'd be asking citizens who are trying to figure out how to put their children through college to also support people who are not supposed to be here in the first place."

Others, such as Anastasia Mann of the Rutgers University Eagleton Institute of Politics, disagree.

"New Jersey has been squeezing the labor out of its immigrants without doing anything to integrate them," said Mann, noting that a recently released Rutgers University report said that immigrants make up 28 percent of the state's workforce and account for nearly a quarter of all earnings. "Some of that has been left to non-profits and churches."

Englewood Mayor Michael Wildes, who is an immigration attorney and panel member, said that the two issues, among the most controversial in the nationwide debate on immigration, were "heavily discussed" among the group.

But Wildes added that he did not know if those two items would "make the cut" of the report to the governor, who gave the panel more than a year to conduct research and hold public hearings. He said some members felt that "New Jersey should not get entangled in the driver-license issue."

Corzine established the panel in August 2007, a response to the frustration of local officials and political leaders across the nation after Congress failed to pass comprehensive immigration reform.

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