

Sadly, Compromise is Elusive on Driver's Licenses Debate

By Senator Pete Campos

Here's something we can all agree on: New Mexico's current system of giving driver's licenses to people who are in the country illegally is not working. Unfortunately, the legislature's and the governor's inability to agree on a solution means we're stuck with the problem for another year.

It reminds me of a married couple that agrees their old car needs to be replaced, but she wants to buy a new sedan and he wants to replace it with an SUV. Either would be a good solution, but since they can't agree, they continue to drive a vehicle that keeps giving them trouble.

The house of representatives has passed legislation favored by the governor that would prohibit undocumented immigrants from getting New Mexico driver's licenses. The senate approved a measure that would ensure that undocumented immigrants who get driver's licenses actually are who they say they are and actually live in New Mexico. Either proposal would solve the problem; doing neither just makes things worse.

My view, not surprisingly, is that the senate proposal has more merit. The governor and the house of representatives should seriously consider approving it. Our driver's license is not a passport or an identification card; it is a permit to drive a motor vehicle. It is proof that the person whose name and photo is on it is who that person claims to be, lives where that person claims to live and knows the rules of the road. Properly licensing all New Mexico drivers allows police officers and prosecutors to better track and prosecute drunk drivers. It allows the state to make sure that New Mexico drivers carry the proper insurance. It helps ensure that people involved in accidents won't flee the scene because they don't have a license to drive.

Those are problems we've fought in New Mexico for a long time. By linking driver's license databases with motor vehicle insurance databases and with court databases, we've made our roads safer; that's undeniable. But it is equally undeniable that our current system has flaws. We know that people who don't live in New Mexico are getting driver's licenses. We know that some people who may actually live here are nevertheless providing the state with false addresses when they get a New Mexico driver's license.

We can fix those problems, however, and the legislation approved by the senate would do that. The senate compromise significantly tightens the requirements that foreign nationals must meet to get a driver's license. People who cannot show that they are in the United States legally must provide a tax identification number; proof of their true identity, such as a passport from their home country; two proofs that they really live in New Mexico, such as utility bills, bank statements, rental or mortgage receipts or student records; and they must be fingerprinted. In addition, licenses granted to people who cannot prove that they are here legally will be valid for only a year, and they'd have to come into a motor vehicle division office personally to renew a license.

This compromise will help ensure that people who have New Mexico driver's licenses are genuine New Mexico residents and have provided their true identity to the state. It will keep both our highways and our nation safer. The governor and the house of representatives should look favorably on it.