

Published Thursday | November 15, 2007

Terry says national policy needed on driver's licenses

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WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Rep. Lee Terry said Wednesday that he is backing new congressional efforts to prohibit states from issuing driver's licenses to illegal immigrants.

"Providing driver's licenses to illegal immigrants is wrong, and I will not stand for it," said Terry, a Nebraska Republican.

He said he was motivated by the recent controversy over a plan by New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer to grant driver's licenses to illegal immigrants.

A handful of Nebraskans contacted Terry, generally saying, "How crazy is New York to do this?"

Spitzer dropped the idea Wednesday after meeting with New York lawmakers in Washington, saying that overwhelming public opposition had destroyed the proposal's chances.

His decision shows that illegal immigration remains one of the hottest issues in U.S. politics. Congress has failed to pass broad immigration reforms, supported by President Bush, that would provide legal status to millions of illegal immigrants living in the country.

Terry said issuing driver's licenses to illegal immigrants would provide "government validation to your illegal status."

He said a national policy is needed.

"With a license you can drive right through on I-80," he said of the Interstate highway crossing Nebraska. "It allows you to drive across the U.S. carte blanche."

Terry supports legislation introduced by Rep. Peter King, R-New York, and others prohibiting states from issuing licenses and identification documents to illegal immigrants.

He backs another bill that would withhold federal highway funding if a state issues driver's licenses to illegal immigrants.

Rep. Tom Latham, R-Iowa, has proposed a House resolution saying states shouldn't issue the licenses, a measure Terry also supports.

Terry acknowledged that these efforts are likely to be symbolic.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., favors providing driver's licenses to illegal immigrants as a security matter and to help bring them out of the shadows.

"We all have hopes it'll move, but in reality it stops at the speaker's desk," Terry said.

He disputed Pelosi, saying providing licenses would make it easier for terrorists to get identification.

Several of the attackers in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks had obtained state-issued driver's licenses, he said.

