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Publish Date: 5/6/2006

No special session on immigration

John Fryar
The Daily Record

DENVER — A mariachi band greeted visitors and state employees to the Colorado Capitol for Cinco de Mayo on Friday morning while a Colorado Springs lawmaker was arguing in vain for a special legislative session to consider illegal-immigration issues.

The bills the Legislature did approve during the past four months of their regular 2006 session “only scratched the surface of immigration reform,” Republican Rep. Dave Schultheis told fellow House State Affairs Committee members.

Unless lawmakers return next month to take further action, by the time the Legislature begins its 2007 regular session next January, Colorado risks becoming “an even larger haven for illegal aliens,” Schultheis said.

“This issue raises a public safety threat to the citizens of Colorado and must be immediately addressed,” Schultheis said.

Schultheis’ four fellow State Affairs Committee Republicans supported his idea of having the Legislature call itself back into a special session on illegal immigration, but the panel’s six Democrats rejected the proposal on a party-line vote.

A special session would cost Colorado taxpayers nearly \$15,500 a day.

State Affairs Chairman Paul Weissmann said later Friday that’s money that would be better spent sending his entire committee to Washington, D.C., to lobby the state’s congressional delegation “to pass meaningful, effective immigration reform.”

Weissmann, D-Louisville, said in a statement that “over the past four months, a significant chunk of law-makers’ time was devoted to debating immigration-related issues that are of critical importance to Colorado.”

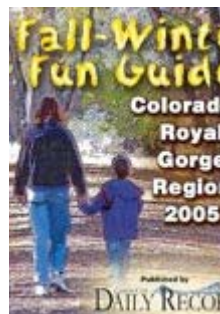
Weissmann said the result has been “a bipartisan package of immigration legislation” that was “the most substantive in the state’s history.”

On Monday, a day when an estimated 75,000 immigrant-rights demonstrators gathered outside the Capitol, Gov. Bill Owens signed the first of those measures, a bill designed to deter Colorado cities from becoming so-called “sanctuaries” for illegal immigrants.

On Thursday, lawmakers completed work on Senate Bill 110, a measure that — if Owens signs it — would establish a \$50,000 fine for producing fake identity documents that illegal immigrants could use fraudulently.

As the Legislature began winding down its annual session work Friday, lawmakers put the finishing touches on at least four more bills that now will also be sent to Owens.

Those measures include:



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— Senate Bill 207, which would create a felony crime of trafficking in illegal immigrants.

— Senate Bill 225, which would create a new Colorado State Patrol unit to enforce state laws against smuggling or trafficking in illegal immigrants.

— House Bill 1306, which would direct that an audit be done of whether government agencies are comply-ing with a state law restricting the kinds of “secure and verifiable” identity documents that can be accepted by those agencies.

— House Bill 1343, which would bar businesses from getting or keeping state government contracts unless those businesses can demonstrate that they don’t knowingly employ people who are in this country ille-gally.

On Monday, lawmakers are scheduled to try to work out a compromise version of Senate Bill 207, a meas-ure that would make it a felony to smuggle illegal immigrants into or through the state.

The Schultheis resolution seeking a special session identified several pieces of legislation he wanted law-makers to consider, all of which were topics of proposals for laws or state constitutional amendments that died during the regular session.

Schultheis’ proposed special-session topics included: requiring English to be the official and generally the only language used by state and local government agencies; requiring employers to participate in federal program to check employees’ legal residency status; addressing local law-enforcement agencies; responsi-bilities in enforcing federal immigration laws; and establishing a system to verify would-be voters’ U.S. citizenship.

Weissmann, however, said Schultheis’ special-session proposals were redundant since those issues already had been debated.



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