

Keep good driver's license standards

Nov 9, 2012 By KIM THATCHER

"The best defense is a good offense"—not only does that work for football but also for some of us preparing for the 2013 legislative session. I think this line will come in handy for many issues—especially for one that's been in the news lately. There's talk about loosening Oregon's standards and issuing driver's licenses to people who are not in this country legally. This could become a hot topic at the state capitol next year.

A few years ago I pushed hard for stronger identification requirements for obtaining an Oregon driver's licenses. Finally, former Governor Ted Kulongoski called for new rules, and shortly after in 2008, the legislature enacted a law to require proof of legal status before getting a driver's license.

In a 2007 executive order talking about the battle against identity theft, and national security, Gov. Kulongoski made a compelling statement about why these tougher standards were necessary. He said, "it is clear that Oregon must tighten its standards for obtaining driver licenses and identification cards in order to more effectively prevent fraud and criminal activity."

I'm certainly not suggesting all illegal immigrants are violent criminals, but a few are. Why should we open the door for a drug dealer from a foreign country to get a driver's license in Oregon? Wouldn't a document like that help them move about undetected while they conduct their illicit activities?

Despite the former governor's legitimate concerns about public safety, his successor, John Kitzhaber, and a group of activists may be trying to repeal the new standards and allow undocumented immigrants to legally operate motor vehicles in Oregon again.

It's my understanding some immigrant advocates and others got together over a year ago to come up with some kind of provisional driver's license for people who can't prove they legally reside in the United States. This group went to Governor Kitzhaber for support and he's now recognized them as an ad-hoc advisory committee.

This work group may be proposing a "solution in search of a problem." Supporters of this new driving privilege card argue that more illegal immigrants are driving around without licenses and without insurance, possibly causing more accidents, since the new tougher eligibility laws took effect nearly five years ago. However, a recent report from ODOT shows that's not the case. Quoting the report, "The analysis of data from before and after changes in driver licensing requirements occurred show no apparent impact on unlicensed driving."

Governor Kitzhaber talked about his support for a provisional license during a May Day rally at the state Capitol. In a letter written in support of that event, the governor said he wanted to help illegal immigrants "traveling from home to work" and "allow more "people to come out of the shadows."

First, federal law does not allow these immigrants to work in the U.S. without proof of legal presence. Second, there's probably a good reason they're in the shadows; because they are breaking the law by being in the country. Why should we encourage their actions by issuing a state sanctioned permission slip to stay here?

My fear is that if such a proposal is adopted for alternative driver's licenses, we won't be able to "un-ring the bell." Supporters say these cards would only be used for driving and no other identification purposes. Doubtful. I'm sure many agencies would accept them as a legitimate form of ID, opening doors to other services, whether it's a bank account, welfare benefits, you name it. Beyond public safety concerns one has to wonder about the message we would be sending, extending a giant welcome mat to encourage illegal immigrants to come to Oregon.

Currently illegal immigrants can only get driver's licenses in a handful of states. In fact Tennessee stopped issuing provisional licenses due to rampant fraud and corruption. Last year legislation to implement a similar license in Oregon was rejected by state lawmakers but there may be a stronger push in the next legislative session now that Gov. Kitzhaber is onboard. I have met with Kitzhaber's staff to gain understanding of what's being proposed and will watch to see if a bill surfaces before the 2013 session.

We need to have a strong "offense" ready to defend the system we've worked hard to improve in recent years. Remember, driving is a privilege not a right. *(Kim Thatcher, Republican, represents the 25th district in the state House of Representatives.)*