

Under the Dome with DeAngelo

*An Update on the New Jersey State Government by Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo
(November 2015)*

Welcome back Under the Dome where the State House dome is busy with the both houses of the Legislature back from recess and in full swing of activity.

As is customary following an election day where members of the State Senate and/or the General Assembly are on the ballot, the period between that Election Day and when the new Legislature is sworn-in (on the second Tuesday of January) is called "Lame Duck." On most Mondays and Thursday for the next two months, the legislative committees and full houses will be in session considering potentially hundreds of measures before the end of the session and in hopes of presenting these bills to the Governor for signature. The vast majority of these bills will have already been considered by these bodies, however, there are those bills that can be more controversial in nature and will garner significant attention.

On top of the list of controversial measures under review is a bill that would allow New Jersey driver's licenses to be issued to undocumented immigrants who can prove the basic requirements to obtain a license but cannot prove their legal immigration status. The bill, called the New Jersey Safe and Responsible Drivers Act, is modeled after a California law that was upheld by federal officials.

An applicant for a four-year digital license would be required to pay the normal fees plus an additional fee of no more than \$50 per license to cover administration costs. The license card would be clearly indicate that "federal limits may apply" in creating restrictions and would not serve as a means of providing evidence of citizenship.

Proponents of the bill believe that by expanding the ability to obtain a driver's license, and thereby requiring proper education and testing of these individuals, we can make our roadways safer. Furthermore, supporters of the measure contend that these individuals are currently operating vehicles. By providing an opportunity to obtain a license, they believe that the drivers would become safer behind the wheel after proper training and education about the state's motor vehicle laws.

Detractors of the measure believe that licenses for undocumented immigrants can pose a security threat. Some believe that it would be difficult to verify the residency of these individuals and potentially dangerous if the license applicants have no evidence of their immigration status.

Pew Research has found that while U.S. immigration tapered off nationally between 2009 and 2012. New Jersey, however, saw a slight increase during the same timeframe. There are an estimated 525,000 illegal immigrants in New Jersey; the fifth highest in the country.

While there are 12 states that allow undocumented immigrants to obtain a license, providing licenses to a potentially large group of individuals here in New Jersey is troublesome. Given the recent acts of terror around the globe and the rising concern regarding fake passports being used by terrorists to move from country to country, we must ensure that none of these individuals can

penetrate our homeland security system. Governor Christie has vowed to veto the legislation should the bill get through the extensive legislative process. I have heard from hundreds of men and women in opposition to and in support of this measure. The emotional connection that some feel to this issue -- on both sides of the debate -- is very heavily fueled and both routed in safety arguments that must be carefully researched before further action on the bill.

Another significantly controversial measure that is under consideration in the State Senate would legalize marijuana use in New Jersey. There are four states -- Colorado, Alaska, Oregon, and Washington - plus the District of Columbia where marijuana has been legalized. In 23 states, including New Jersey, medical marijuana use is legal. Limits on legal amounts of possession vary from state to state.

Under the proposed measure, Senate Bill 1896 (S-1896) would legalize, tax and regulate marijuana possession by someone 21 years of age and older of less than one ounce of marijuana. The bill also would establish parameters regarding marijuana plant possession, manufacturing, transportation and other areas all to be under the oversight of the state's Division of Alcohol and Beverage Control.

During a several hour legislative hearing, law enforcement, health professional, civil rights groups, religious leaders and policy experts provided input from both sides of the issue. According to the Drug Policy Alliance, half of all drug arrests in 2012 -- or approximately 750,000 people -- were arrested for marijuana violations. Legalization advocates such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) point out that New Jersey spent an estimated \$127.4 million on enforcement of these law in 2010 alone. However, opponents claim that marijuana can be a "gateway drug" that can lead to use and abuse of other controlled substances.

Governor Christie has promised to veto a measure that would legalize marijuana use should it be passed by the Legislature. The senate sponsor of the bill has indicated that the legislative process of this bill may take a long time given the Governor's opposition, and may even carry on until a new governor takes office in 2018.

While these two issues are among the most controversial and talked about since the Legislature has reconvened, it is likely during the on-going "Lame Duck Session" that many more issue may quickly arise. Most assuredly, though, the next few months will bring up new issues both big and small that will require quick action.

On a personal note, I would like to thank the residents of the 14th Legislative District for their support on Election Day in giving me the opportunity to continue to represent you in the General Assembly. Our state continues to fight back from the great recession so our job is not done. I will strive daily to work to address the issues big and small for the working families of our District and State.

I will see you back here next month -- Under the Dome.

Editor's Note: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo (D-Hamilton) represents the 14th Legislative District which includes parts of Mercer and Middlesex counties. He can be reached at AsmDeAngelo@njleg.org; phone (609) 631-7501; www.WayneDeAngelo.com; Facebook: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo; or Twitter: @DeAngeloLD14.