

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

February 19, 2006

Center stage in illegals debate; Rogers: 'This is something my constituents want'

JIM THARPE

Chip Rogers discovered a surefire way to liven up his two-hour radio talk show whenever the phone lines went dead.

"We had this box with red lights so we could tell when callers were on the line," Rogers said. "If we had a slow day, all you had to do was mention illegal immigration and things immediately lit up."

The 37-year-old Rogers, now a Republican state senator from Woodstock, has given up the radio show after five years on WYXC-AM in Cartersville. But he's reminded every day that the mere mention of illegal immigration can fire up a conversation.

Rogers is the sponsor of Senate Bill 529, the "Georgia Security and Immigration Compliance Act," which is about to ignite a fierce debate in the Legislature. The bill --- the first comprehensive piece of illegal immigration legislation to come before the General Assembly --- will be aired in a Senate committee this week and could be voted on by the full Senate by early next month.

Rogers' plan is likely to pass in an election-year Legislature controlled by Republicans. A recent poll showed 82 percent of Georgians want lawmakers to address the issue. Many Americans fault the federal government for failing to enforce immigration laws on the books. And Rogers says it's that failure he's trying to address.

"When there's no enforcement, the negative impact of illegal immigration falls on the states," Rogers said. "So it's appropriate that the state looks at the situation and tries to deal with it."

Vilified in some quarters

Rogers is quickly becoming the face of immigration reform in Georgia. The first-term senator is touted by supporters as a likely candidate for higher office, but vilified by some advocates for Georgia's growing Hispanic population who have called Rogers' proposals racist.

Rogers, who maintains "I don't have a racist bone in my body," said the charge is leveled to divert attention from the substance of his bill.

"It's an issue that's far too important for us to get bogged down with name-calling and using the divisiveness of racial politics," Rogers said. "Not doing it now means we will have an even more divisive debate at a future date. It's an issue that's not going away."

Anyone expecting a fire-breathing extremist will be disappointed in Rogers.

The velvet-voiced father of four keeps a Spartan legislative office that features a rainbow drawing by his 6-year-old daughter, Emma, taped crookedly on a wall near his desk, just where she climbed in a chair and left it as a surprise.

Rogers meets frequently with those who oppose his legislation, and even his critics say he has shown a willingness to compromise. He is a persuasive, confident and measured speaker at forums. He donates his \$16,500 annual legislative salary to charity --- most goes to a Cherokee County children's center and crisis-pregnancy organization.

"He's a polished speaker who does his homework," said state Sen. Bill Hamrick (R-Carrollton). "He has a good sense of humor and a lot of good qualities needed for working bills through the process."

Last week, Rogers appeared before the Senate Agriculture Committee to push another bill he sponsored, this one to crack down on dogfights. One committee member asked him why he had removed a section that would make it easier to prosecute people engaged in cockfighting. Rogers replied that he personally finds cockfighting "horrific," but added that "a lot of interested parties" would not support the bill if that provision remained.

"I'm about getting something done," Rogers said. The committee OK'd the bill unanimously.

As Rogers prepares to bring those negotiating skills to a much larger audience, he at times seems reticent about the prospect.

"I don't want to be the face of the illegal immigration issue," he said. "But this is obviously something my constituents want done."

Rogers served one term in the Georgia House before winning his Senate seat in 2004. When he went to town hall meetings, he says, all constituents wanted to talk about was illegal immigration. Fellow churchgoers bent his

ear on Sunday. When he ran for office, it was the most-talked-about topic he encountered.

Woodstock resident Ivor Cohen is one of those who want lawmakers to address illegal immigration. Cohen, who manages a courier service, came to the United States legally from South Africa about eight years ago. He recently became a U.S. citizen.

"I did everything by the books, and it irritates me for people to think they can come into this country illegally with no consequences," Cohen said. "The cost to the country in education and medical resources alone must be enormous. I'm not angry at any group of people. This is just about what's right and what's wrong."

Estimates of illegals vary

There are an estimated 250,000 to 800,000 illegal immigrants in Georgia. Supporters of get-tough legislation say they sap vital resources from legal residents and dodge most of the tax burden. Critics of the legislation say illegals underpin much of the economy --- from the poultry industry to home building --- and fill jobs Americans don't want.

Rogers' bill would use the state income tax code to penalize employers who hire illegal immigrants and would deny public benefits and services to adults illegally in the country.

He acknowledges his bill alone won't solve the problem.

"This will be a multiyear process," he said. "Illegal immigration is really a problem that has been building in this nation for 25 years. ... My bill is just a first step in the process."

Rogers said he has never knowingly used illegal immigrant labor himself.

"The only time I ever had a question was when these guys came out to paint my house a few years ago," he said. "I asked them, and they [verbally] verified to me they were all legal."

Advocates for illegal immigrants have pounced on Rogers' proposals. One Hispanic radio station recently invited him to be a guest, assuring him it would provide security. At a recent Capitol protest one demonstrator carried a sign that read: "Deport Chip Rogers."

And he has had to deflect the wrath of those on the other side of the issue who think his approach to immigration reform is too soft.

"You phony [expletive]," begins one handwritten letter to his office. "How much did they pay you to cow down?"

State Sen. Sam Zamarripa (D-Atlanta), who chairs the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials, has conferred with Rogers in an effort to mitigate portions of SB 529.

"He's very much a rule-of-law guy," said Zamarripa, one of three Hispanics in the Legislature. "He believes in the certainty of the rule of law. I believe that from time to time laws have to be re-evaluated and modified to keep up with the realities of the day."

Zamarripa, for example, believes illegal immigrants now in this country should be given amnesty. Rogers thinks they should have to go back home and apply for legal entry.

"You can't ask someone to come in and work with their hands and their backs four or five years and say, 'Thank you. Now you can go,' " Zamarripa said.

Countered Rogers: "If you have violated the law to be here illegally, then you should have to go back and stand in line and wait behind all the other people who are waiting to get in legally."

Zamarripa said he thinks Rogers is "driven by some deep moral convictions."

"I think that's a powerful force," Zamarripa said. "But it can also lead you to do some things that might not work."

Rogers has also been accused of pandering to election-year politics, a charge he denies, noting that he introduced four bills on illegal immigration last year. None went anywhere, as he didn't have the backing of the Senate's leaders at the time.

"It's rank politics, and it fosters the kind of intolerance that makes it acceptable to be mean toward immigrants and undocumented workers," state Sen. Vincent Fort (D-Atlanta) said of Rogers' proposal.

Rogers' supporters argue he is doing exactly what elected officials are supposed to do: representing the wishes of his constituents.

"Chip understands the issues the grass roots is concerned about, and he's able to take their concerns and turn them into policy," Hamrick said.

Rogers grew up mostly in northwest Cobb County, playing football, baseball and basketball in school. He focused on track and basketball in high school and still loves sports.

"I tell people I know a little bit about politics and a whole lot about sports," he said.

After high school, Rogers earned a degree in industrial engineering from Georgia Tech. He later got a master's in business administration from Georgia State University and worked briefly for the carpet industry in Dalton.

Rogers had done some broadcasting in graduate school and also worked in radio at a small station in Cartersville, then bought WYXC-AM six years ago. He has sold the station and is waiting for the FCC to transfer the license to the new owner.

Rogers' young political career hit an embarrassing bump during his 2004 Senate campaign when two teenage campaign workers were arrested for stealing the campaign signs of his opponent. Rogers said at the time he told his campaign manager that the signs were "fair game" after dozens of Rogers' signs were stolen. Rogers said he later rescinded that remark, but his change of heart did not get relayed to the teen workers. Rogers won the election with 81 percent of the vote.

Rogers and his wife, Amy, have four children, ages 5 months to 6 years. Their photos line his office along with a framed picture of Ronald Reagan and a piece of the Berlin Wall.

"My third child, who is 2, is named after him --- Reagan Thomas Rogers," the lawmaker said, beaming.

Some Republicans predict Rogers' elevated profile in the immigration debate could provide the platform for a run for higher office. "He has a lot of potential," Hamrick said.

But Rogers discounts any such suggestion, at least for now. "With the age of my children, I don't see myself doing anything other than this for quite some time," he said. "The amount of time my job takes away from them now is a significant concern to me. I don't see that happening anytime in the near future."

SB 529: WHAT IT WOULD DO

* 1. Discourage businesses from hiring illegal immigrants by prohibiting employers from receiving state income tax benefits if they hire undocumented workers. Employers who pay a worker more than \$600 a

year would have to maintain proof that the employee is a legal resident in order to claim that employee's salary as a business expense.

* 2. Require proof of legal residence for anyone older than 18 who seeks public benefits. Prenatal care would be exempt. The courts have ruled that illegal immigrants are entitled to a K-12 education and emergency medical care.

* 3. Require that public contractors use only workers who are in the country legally. This section of the bill would not hold a contractor responsible for a subcontractor who hires illegal immigrants.

* 4. Require verification of the legal status of any person arrested for a felony criminal violation.

* 5. Establish penalties for human smuggling. Penalties range from 15 years in prison to 25 years in prison for anyone who knowingly recruits or transports a person who is subjected to forced labor.

Chip Rogers on illegal immigration:

* "The problem has not been a lack of laws. The problem has been a complete lack of (federal) enforcement. I'm firmly convinced the problem could be addressed with the laws we have today if we would only enforce those laws."

* "When there's no enforcement, the negative impact of illegal immigration falls on the states. So it's appropriate that the state looks at the situation and tries to deal with it."

* "To think that any one bill will solve all the problems is wishful thinking. That's simply not going to happen. This will be a multi-year process. Illegal immigration is really a problem that has been building in this nation for 25 years. We won't solve it in one year. My bill is just a first step in the process."

* "The way it stands now, you have certain employers willing to violate the law who are being rewarded by the marketplace. You have others who are not violating the law and the marketplace punishes them. We want a system that has clear bright lines of what an employer can do and what they can expect."

* "When we begin to say that illegal actions are now legal just because they turn a profit, we have stepped over a very important line. While the numbers are important, of paramount importance is the rule of law and

making sure everyone in Georgia realizes what the rules are and that they have to play by them."

* "We can make up laws all day long that tell governments they can't give things to illegal aliens. But if the government or employer is given a fake piece of identification we really haven't achieved much. I'm still looking for the magic bullet to solve this problem. But I don't know if it exists."