

Dan Walters: Immigrant activists score wins

By Dan Walters

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Twenty-one years ago, California voters passed Proposition 187, which sought to deny public benefits to illegal immigrants.

Ultimately, however, it was voided by the courts, sparked a political backlash that divided the Republican Party, galvanized Latino and Asian political activism, and led California politicians to set a new and radically different course.

While immigration reform ties the Republican-dominated Congress in knots, the California Legislature, with Gov. Jerry Brown's ardent support, is making the state's estimated 3 million undocumented immigrants as legal as possible.

Brown has been highly critical of Congress for stalling immigration reform, and declared California to be "part of a great and grand transition."

Making the undocumented eligible for driver's licenses, college aid and licensure as lawyers are just three of the better known examples.

The California Immigrant Policy Center described what's been happening as "two decades of pro-immigrant transformation" in its compilation of recent laws.

This year, the Legislature passed at least 10 more bills, some of which drew Republican votes. And the state GOP softened its once-harsh official stance on illegal immigration.

The new bills don't have the high profiles of previous actions and are largely aimed at advancing civil rights protections, essentially treating illegal immigrants as a protected minority. One, for instance, would expand the Unruh Civil Rights Act, making it illegal for a business to discriminate on the basis of immigration status.

It has not, however, been a slam dunk for legislators who want to raise the status of illegal immigrants.

This year, for instance, Sen. Ricardo Lara, D-Bell Gardens, one of the most active legislators on the issue, had to scale back his ambitions to extend eligibility for state-backed health care coverage to everyone, regardless of immigration status.

His bill made it through the Senate but stalled in the Assembly. However, an expansion of coverage to those under 19 was quietly written into one of the budget trailer bills.

Likewise, another activist legislator, Assemblyman Luis Alejo, D-Watsonville, persuaded the Assembly to pass a bill creating a special work permit process for illegal immigrant farmworkers, but the bill stalled in the Senate.

Finally, a sensational homicide on the San Francisco waterfront, allegedly by a convicted felon with five deportations, called into question the widely varying policies of local police vis-à-vis cooperation with federal immigration agents.

While police in conservative communities often hold arrestees for immigration agents, those in liberal ones, such as San Francisco, have refused to cooperate with the feds – becoming, in the popular parlance, "sanctuary cities."

While polling tells us that California voters now support immigration reform – a welcome awakening to reality – they don't like sanctuary cities' refusal to cooperate on deporting dangerous criminals.

