Massachusetts Driver's License Access Bill Enacted Over Baker's Veto

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Starting next summer, immigrants without legal status in Massachusetts will have access to state-issued driver's licenses thanks to a policy muscled through by lawmakers this week over Gov. Charlie Baker's veto.

The Massachusetts Senate voted 32-8 Thursday afternoon to complete the override of the governor's veto. The House voted 119-36 on Wednesday to initiate the override, with the law's passage reflecting the strength of Democrats, and weakness of Republicans, in the 200-seat Legislature.

Prior to the vote, Sen. Adam Gomez recalled growing up in an impoverished and diverse area of Springfield and said the new law will allow undocumented immigrants struggling with jobs and housing to flourish and make more meaningful contributions to communities. Emotional supporters of the bill watched it move past the finish line following years of unsuccessful advocacy.

The bill was dubbed the "Work and Family Mobility Act" and its backers said licenses would remove fears undocumented immigrants carry with them about losing their residency should they be pulled over by police while driving to work or a medical appointment or taking kids to sports practice. And they said roads will be safer if more drivers receive training and have insurance. Sen. John Keenan said that he's been hoping for 12 years that the federal government would address the issue through comprehensive immigration reform, but he doesn't believe that will happen in a Congress where partisan

divisions run deep.

Lawmakers and advocates plan to mark the new law with what they are describing as a “ceremonial bill signing” Monday afternoon. Opponents of the bill (H 4805) worried about the message the policy sends about illegal immigration and said the law could open up questions about citizenship and an opportunity for voter fraud, assertions rejected by proponents.

The law leaves the job of verifying foreign documents presented by individuals seeking licenses to the Registry of Motor Vehicles, which will be under the oversight of a new governor by the time licenses become available in July 2023. Baker’s teams have run the registry for seven years and he wrote in his veto (H 4822) that the RMV “does not have the expertise or ability to verify the validity of many types of documents from other countries.”

All three Senate Republicans voted to sustain the governor’s veto and they were joined by Senate Democrats Nick Collins of South Boston, Anne Gobi of Spencer, Marc Pacheco of Taunton, Walter Timilty of Milton, and John Velis of Westfield. Candidate for governor Geoff Diehl said he would support a ballot question that would repeal the new law.