

Fla. rep proposes hiring preference for Floridians

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- Photos of vehicles with license tags from Texas, Louisiana and other states, but nary one from Florida, flashed on viewing screens in a Senate committee room Wednesday.

A union official showed the pictures taken at a job site as he urged lawmakers to give Floridians preference for construction work paid for by state and local taxpayers.

"I've walked through numerous construction site parking lots," said Russell Leggette, an organizer from St. Petersburg for the Florida Pipetrades Council. "Seeing a Floridian tag is a rare occurrence."

Sen. Dan Gelber, D-Miami Beach, told the Commerce Committee that he's drafted some proposals designed to give Florida residents preference for such jobs if their qualifications are "substantially equal" to those of out-of-state workers.

"They're people who don't live here, don't pay taxes here, are going to leave right after they've finished their project," said Gelber, a lawyer also running for the Democratic attorney general nomination. "Out-of-work construction workers or tradesmen in Florida are being denied jobs that often are being paid for with money from Floridians, tax money."

His proposals are similar to laws already passed in some other states but would not apply to federally funded projects.

Such legislation must avoid violating provisions in the U.S. Constitution that prohibit states from discriminating against citizens from other states, interfering with interstate commerce and imposing unfair procedures on individuals.

Other provisions would require contractors working on state and local government projects to keep records showing nonresident workers have provided proof of health insurance if they are eligible for Medicaid, U.S. citizenship, compliance with Florida immunization requirements for their children, a valid driver license and auto insurance required by state law.

Employers who fail to have that information available for state inspection could be fined \$500 per nonresident worker for a first offense and \$1,000 for subsequent violations.

Gelber said he plans to amend those provisions to a bill he's sponsoring (SB 2482) that would address another issue raised by Leggette - the hiring of temporary foreign workers for nonagricultural jobs. Neither that bill nor a House companion (HB 1531) have yet had a committee hearing.

Before employers can apply for foreign worker visas they must show they've been unable to find qualified U.S. applicants after advertising jobs for 10 days. Gelber's bill would increase the advertising time to 30 days.

Leggette told the committee of two instances, one this year and one in 2009, in which dozens of local tradesmen had been rejected for shipyard jobs by employers who indicated they planned to seek foreigners for those positions. He later said he hasn't yet been able to confirm whether foreigners indeed were hired.

State work force services director Kevin Neal told the committee only 2,197 temporary worker visas were issued last year in Florida, a relatively insignificant number in a state with more than 1 million unemployed residents. Just 12 of those were for construction jobs, Neal said. Most were for maids, housekeepers and restaurant workers.

Leggette, though, cited much a much higher figure for 2008 - 11,095 visas.

"On the surface this all sounds very, very bad," said Sen. Evelyn Lynn, R-Ormond Beach. "But I think a little more information and more accurate information would be important."