

License law dominates final day

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ANNAPOLIS -- Frederick's state lawmakers fought Monday to protect a proposal to prevent illegal immigrants from getting drivers' licenses.

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The license law was one of the biggest unresolved issues throughout Monday, the last scheduled day of the General Assembly's regular session. As the evening wore on, state leaders warned that failing to resolve the issue could result in a special session.

Lawmakers appeared to be reaching a compromise as of presstime Monday, but it was unclear if they would take action before session ended at midnight.

[Frederick](#) County Sen. David Brinkley, a Republican, urged the Senate to stay firm against any compromise that would result in illegal immigrants getting licenses.

He was one of the original sponsors on a bill that would require proof of legal presence and fought throughout session to keep the proposal alive.

Maryland is one of only four states that does not require proof of legal presence for licenses and IDs.

The requirement is necessary for compliance with the federal Real ID law. If the state chooses not to comply, then licenses could not be used for entering federal buildings and boarding airplanes.

The House preferred a two-tiered system. It would allow existing drivers to get licenses without proving they are in the country legally, or have the option of proving their legal status and getting a Real ID-compliant license.

All eight [Frederick](#) lawmakers have opposed that system.

The Senate version would simply require everyone to prove their legal status in the country.

"That would be better than the way we have because this has been a safe haven for everybody to come and get a license in Maryland and you don't have to show that much," said Delegate Paul Stull, a [Frederick](#) County Republican who argued for the Senate version.

A compromise measure would allow existing drivers to keep or renew their licenses until July 1, 2015. On that date, all the licenses without proof of legal presence would expire.

After hearing about the compromise, Brinkley proposed an unusual procedural move to give direction to the Senate's representatives on a conference committee intended to resolve the dispute.



Photo by Associated Press

President of the Senate Thomas V. Mike Miller presides over the senate on the last day of the legislative session Monday in Annapolis. The Maryland General Assembly gave final approval to the state's \$13.8 billion operating budget.

Brinkley's motion would have barred the conference committee from agreeing to a two-tiered system.

"I think it's important that our documents actually mean something and have some integrity," Brinkley said. "It's far simpler to have a single system."

It failed 14-32, however, after Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. said it would tie the hands of the conference committee.

The stakes are particularly high in [Frederick](#) County, since a requirement for legal presence could prevent immigrants from getting licenses. If they drive without a license, they could be arrested, detained and eventually deported under a program implemented by the [Frederick](#) County Sheriff's Office.

Deputies have limited power to enforce federal immigration law through a program in conjunction with the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Deputies check immigration status of those arrested and driving without a license is an arrestable offense. If illegal immigrants are no longer able to obtain drivers' licenses and continue to drive, they could face deportation proceedings.

Sen. Alex Mooney, a Republican who represents [Frederick](#) and Washington counties, warned state lawmakers against the virulent anti-immigrant tone that tends to come with discussions of immigrant policies.

He supports a requirement for license applicants to prove they are in the country legally, but believes the state should be careful in its debate.

"Let's just remember these are generally good, hardworking people that are part of our history, and they're not bad people," he said.

He also cautioned that programs like those implemented by the sheriff could do more harm than good.

"Who's going to go testify against a rape, a murder, a gang attack, if they think they are going to be deported by the sheriff?" Mooney asked. "So that's what you've got to be careful for."

He thinks the federal government should allow more immigrants to meet the demand for workers and should work harder to protect its borders.