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Gov. seeks high-tech driver's licenses

Napolitano signs deal with feds, but legislative OK may be tough

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CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES

PHOENIX — Gov. Janet Napolitano signed a deal with federal officials Thursday to create a new "technologically enhanced" state driver's license.

The agreement with the Department of Homeland Security requires Arizona to get proof that someone is a U.S. citizen and get a Social Security number before granting one of the new licenses, on top of existing requirements for photo ID, date of birth and address.

These licenses also would have features to make them less subject to counterfeiting.

Napolitano hopes to have them available by the end of 2008. But that will require legislative approval, which could be hard to get since some lawmakers contend the federal Real ID Act will create a national ID card.

Further down the road, the pact also requires Arizona to create even more secure state licenses "as soon as practicable" that comply with the Real ID Act.

Homeland Security has yet to announce what documents are acceptable to get one of those, and what "security features," possibly including biometric information about the holder, would be imbedded in the license.

Napolitano said Arizonans who fear providing the government with additional documentation or don't like security features on licenses won't be required to obtain one: They can keep existing licenses, which cost between \$10 and \$25 and are good until age 65.

The new licenses would cost an additional \$4 every time they have to be renewed, which would be every five years.

But Napolitano said existing licenses soon will no longer be accepted as proof of U.S. residency for motorists driving into this country from Mexico. And licenses that do not meet the yet-to-be-developed Real ID requirements eventually will not be accepted for federal purposes, most notably to board an aircraft, meaning travelers might need a passport even for domestic flights.

Napolitano also said the new licenses will help enforce Arizona's law making it illegal for companies to knowingly hire undocumented workers because they prove both identification and citizenship.

State Sen. Karen Johnson, R-Mesa, said she is "livid" Napolitano promised Arizona will comply with the Real ID Act and promised to fight the plan despite its voluntary nature.

"The federal government's going to get all this information," Johnson said.

Laura Keehner, a Homeland Security spokeswoman, said there will not be a national database.

Instead, she said, each state will keep its own records containing the additional information.

Johnson said that's little better, saying there have been incidents in which personal information held by government agencies has been lost or stolen.

Keehner said she does not know what will be required to get a license that complies with Real ID. Nor could she say if personal information like an individual's physical features, fingerprints or even retinal scans would be collected, encoded on the card or possibly put onto a computer chip built into the license.

Johnson said it was wrong of Napolitano to sign the agreement with those issues unresolved.

"Who is the governor to say what we are going to do here in Arizona?" she said. "She's only one branch of our state government."

Napolitano said she did not commit to blind obedience to whatever the Department of Homeland Security eventually decrees for final Real ID rules. But she sidestepped the question of whether she can back out of the deal solely because she doesn't like the regulations.

"I'm not going to speculate," the governor said. "We'll see what the rules are."

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