

Bills would ease gun rules despite public's concerns

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An Arizona bill that would allow concealed guns on college campuses has gained national attention, sparking a debate over whether to let students and teachers arm themselves.

But it's only one of at least 15 measures in the Republican-led Legislature this year aimed at loosening gun controls in a state that has long had a fascination with firearms.

Although polls indicate that a growing number of Arizonans favor stricter gun laws, GOP legislators and pro-gun activists continue their fight to expand the right to bear arms.

And they appear to be winning.

"For a long time in Arizona, we were losing rights with more and more gun-control laws," says Todd Rathner, a Tucson-based board member and lobbyist for the National Rifle Association. "But, for the past 10 years, we've really been on the offensive. We've taken the game to a new level. We've gained so much ground."

One of the bills filed this session would allow you to carry a pistol in some restaurants - so long as you don't touch the beer and liquor. That measure continues to advance, getting preliminary support from the full Senate last month, although Gov. Janet Napolitano vetoed a similar bill in 2005.

Another measure would make it legal to show a weapon if you feel physically threatened by others. That also has moved through a number of legislative committees.

So has the measure that would allow concealed weapons on college campuses.

So why the disconnect between Arizona's more moderate electorate and conservative Legislature?

Political observers and those in the trenches say it's a combination of several things: stepped-up efforts by the influential gun lobby, high voter turnout among gun-rights supporters and reaction to recent high-profile shootings such as February's Northern Illinois University killing spree and last year's Virginia Tech massacre that left 33 people dead.

Bruce Merrill, who has overseen hundreds of Cronkite-Eight public-opinion polls, says Arizona voters voice strong support for gun control, abortion rights and putting illegal immigrants on a path toward citizenship.

"For a very long time, we've had a Legislature in Arizona that is much more conservative on social issues than the electorate in general," he says.

Part of the reason, Merrill says, is that many of the state's elections are decided during primary races, which traditionally have low voter turnouts.

A February Cronkite-Eight poll indicates that 73 percent of Arizona voters oppose a proposal that would allow concealed-carry permit holders to bring handguns onto both K-12 and university campuses.

Three years ago, another poll said that nearly 80 percent of Arizona voters opposed a measure making it legal for someone to carry a firearm into

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bars and restaurants if that person did not drink alcohol.

The NRA's Rathner and other gun backers don't put any stock in the polls. In fact, they point to other surveys that indicate just the opposite.

Although the NRA contributes some cash to the campaigns of sympathetic politicians, it is the organization's clout with voters that has made it such a powerful lobbying force in Arizona and elsewhere. Nationwide, about 80 percent of NRA-endorsed candidates get elected, Rathner says.

Old West revival

Still, the Arizona gun proposals are putting many on edge.

The bills return Arizona to the days of the Old West when people had a "shoot 'em up on the streets" mentality, says Joe Montes, 49, a former principal at Phoenix's Trevor G. Browne High School. Montes, who now works as an education crisis-management consultant in San Diego, fears that relaxing gun-control laws may lead to more violence in restaurants, schools and other places.

"I feel you should be able to own a weapon and use it to protect yourself or go hunting," he says, "but I don't see why you should need to carry it to the Olive Garden with your family. It should be home under lock and key."

That's not a view shared by Benjamin Packard.

He fired his first gun at age 11 when he was growing up in Flagstaff and mostly uses his five firearms - a couple of shotguns, two rifles and a pistol - to hunt dove and big game.

But whenever he steps out of his Chandler apartment, the pistol is by his side.

A sales representative for AT&T, Packard wants to see stricter requirements before gun owners can obtain and renew a concealed-carry weapons permit. But he firmly supports the Second Amendment.

"Everyone has a right to defend themselves. If you don't want to carry a gun, don't carry a gun, but they shouldn't take away my right to it," Packard, 30, said before heading to Mesa's Caswell Shooting Range to fire off a few rounds.

"I hope I never have to be the person who stops a shooter," he said, "but I'd rather do that than take a bullet or watch other people get shot."

Gun bills galore

Some Democratic-sponsored bills, which would limit where a person could keep or carry a gun, have stalled in the Republican-led Legislature. Meanwhile, a half-dozen other bills, seeking to clarify laws banning weapons in airport-security areas or barring illegal immigrants from carrying firearms, are moving forward.

So are many of the bills targeting gun control.

State Sen. Karen Johnson, who introduced two controversial gun bills this session, said recent mass shootings have forced lawmakers to give the public more tools to protect itself.

"More and more of these incidents are occurring, and it's causing different legislators to think a gun-free zone is just an open invitation for someone to say, 'Hey, I can go there and do anything I want because no one is going to stop me,'" said Johnson, R-Mesa. "We've got to

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stop having gun-free zones."

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Johnson's Senate Bill 1214, which would allow concealed-weapons permit holders to carry handguns at Arizona community colleges or public universities, narrowly passed the Senate Judiciary Committee and is expected to be considered by the full body.

The bill was amended to exclude K-12 public schools but still has encountered resistance from Arizona's three public universities: Arizona State University, the University of Arizona and Northern Arizona University.

Regents' stance

The Arizona Board of Regents, which oversees the colleges, unanimously passed a resolution last week reiterating its stance that university campuses remain gun-free.

Another Mesa Republican, Rep. Russell Pearce, introduced a measure that would make it legal for someone to display or draw a firearm if he felt physically threatened by another person. But under House Bill 2629, the person would not be able to point the weapon, discharge it or use it to make verbal threats against someone else.

And under Senate Bill 1132 people would be able to take pistols into restaurants if the owner posted a sign giving permission. Those possessing a pistol cannot drink any alcohol on site.

"I've never seen so many gun bills in my life, in my 14 years down here (at the Legislature)," says Sen. Ken Chevront, a Phoenix Democrat and restaurateur who opposes the gun legislation.

"I think it's just the insecurity that people have of feeling unsafe in areas where they should feel safe."

But Chevront warns: "When you have more guns, you have more shootings, and you have more deaths."

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