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Beware ID funding mandate

Wednesday, August 12, 2009

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South Carolina played a prominent role in the national resistance to a poorly considered and costly federal mandate for more secure state identification cards, known as REAL ID. That revolt is beginning to succeed with the introduction of new federal legislation addressing major state concerns. But our state must continue to insist that if the federal government wants things done its way, the federal government must pay.

There were two main concerns with the REAL ID law: cost and privacy. A national database of all state ID records could make identity theft easier. Proponents say the new bill does away with the national database.

The larger problem was that costs would fall mainly on the states. As Gov. Mark Sanford wrote to Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff last year, "It seems to me there is something wrong when the federal government imposes the burden of creating a national ID system on the states -- but only pays for two percent of the cost."

The new bill, according to Gov. Sanford, would reduce an "enormous unfunded burden." Certainly sponsors of the new ID bill before Congress contend that it will reduce the financial burden on states.

But a careful analysis by the Cato Institute raises a flag. Processing 245 million Americans for new IDs within six years is likely to cost states as much as \$11 billion, Cato estimates.

Cato also cites the estimate of an \$8.5 billion cost to the states by the National Governors Association and the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators. These numbers are a far cry from the sponsors' contention that the bill for the states will be less than \$2 billion.

The purpose of a national verification standard for state identification cards is to make it harder for criminals, terrorists and illegal immigrants to obtain false IDs. Terror attacks on 9/11 introduced a national security urgency to create such a standard.

The South Carolina Legislature, and the governor, should continue to insist on full federal funding for the costs that might fall on our state government for this federal mandate.

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