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Minnick looking at immigration reform options

Congressman stops in Lewiston as he embarks on tough race leading to November

The punishment for illegally crossing the U.S. border should be proportionate to the offense, U.S. Rep. Walt Minnick said Wednesday. The Democrat representing Idaho's 1st Congressional District said the country needs immigration reform that includes increased security at the U.S.-Mexico border. But Minnick said during a meeting at the Lewiston Tribune on Wednesday he does not support the idea of a physical fence running the entire distance of the border.

"I think you need to have security, but to the extent you have to make it electronic, I'm in favor of high-tech solutions, where economic and practical," Minnick said, arguing electronic security would be more effective.

Minnick, who is in a tight race with state Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Eagle, in his bid for re-election, said he has not seen an immigration bill. But he appeared supportive of a proposal by President Barack Obama that would require illegal immigrants to register with an immigration officer and face a federal magistrate who would determine whether to fine or deport those in the country illegally. "I think something like that has merit," Minnick said. The proposal he's seen is a good starting point for a bill, which he said should include requirements that American employers hire legally.

Minnick does not support automatically deporting the roughly 11 million illegal immigrants already in the United States, and likened the illegal act of crossing the border to speeding in a school zone. Illegal immigrants should face some penalties for their entry into the country, but Minnick said federal magistrates should have the ability to review for criminal records everyone who comes before them to decide what punishment is appropriate on a case-by-case basis.

The proposal he's seen would require immigrants to learn English. They would face deportation if they failed any of the hurdles required by magistrates appointed to adjudicate the issue. Minnick said he also favors increasing federal immigration magistrates, who he thinks should have wide discretion and look at each individual's circumstances. Whether or not illegal immigrants should be allowed to apply for residency or citizenship is something Minnick said he will continue to research.

Any immigration vote likely isn't to take place until the next Congress is seated, and after voters cast votes in the race between Minnick and Labrador this November. The election will be a close one, Minnick predicts.

While he voted against the health care bill, Minnick said he favors portions of the reform bill that dealt with the creation of insurance exchanges that he said would create competition in a state like Idaho. The biggest problem with the health care bill as passed by Congress is it did nothing to cut costs in a time when they're out of control. "Cost control is the most important thing, and there's almost none in it," he said.

But that doesn't mean the bill should be scrapped. Minnick said he opposes the state Legislature's legal challenge of the bill, saying it takes money away from the state in a time of budget constraints. "I think we should keep what's good, and reform what isn't," Minnick said.